

A LESS USUAL SIN CONFESSION PRESENTED IN THE “PASSION OF ST. SABA THE GOTH” (4th CENTURY C.E.)

IONUȚ HOLUBEANU

In his *Letter addressed to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion*¹, James the Just recommended to the Christians: *confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed*².

The present investigation focuses on an unusual public confession of sin, presented in the *Passion of St. Saba the Goth*, a subject which, as far as we know, has been overlooked by scholars.

St. Saba the Goth lived in the second half of the 4th century C.E. in Thervingian Gothia, a territory lied to the north of the lower section of the Danube River dominated by the Thervingian Goths. He was martyred in the persecution of Athanaric (d. 381), being drowned in the river Mousaios (today's Buzău, in Romania), on 12 April 372. Shortly after his martyrdom, about 373–374³, the saint's relics were transported to Caesarea in Cappadocia. His *Passion*⁴ was composed on that occasion, pursuant to the testimony of an eyewitness⁵.

The martyr text has a great historical value since it has been entirely preserved in the original form and it has provided much information about Thervingian Gothia and the Christianity there at the beginning of the 370's. As a matter of fact, the scholars⁶ saw it as a valuable historical source not only in the

¹ Jas. 1.1. All English translations of quotations from the Bible will be taken from *Bible. New Revised Standard Version*, oremus B B, 10 Feb. 2011. { <http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm> } (05.05.2015). I wish to thank Alina Popescu and Coralia Chudley for their improvements of the English used in this paper as well as Barbara Kösters for her support in attaining some of the bibliography.

² Jas. 5.16.

³ Năsturel 1969, 176; Păcurariu 1972, 196; Ionescu 1972, 180; Olteanu 1984, 328; Schäferdiek 1993, 330, 339; Kulikowski 2007, 118.

⁴ First edition by Delehaye 1912, 216–221; repr. in Krüger-Ruhbach 1965, 119–124, and Girardi 2009, 70–109 (Italian translation included). In what follows references to *Passio Sabae* (between round brackets in the main text and all the quotations in the footnotes) are to the Delehaye-edition. An English translation, whence this article draws its quotations, is included in Heather-Matthews 2004, 104–110. I have offered another reading where it seemed better suited to the Greek text.

⁵ See, below, note 61.

⁶ See Delehaye 1912, 288–291; Thompson 1955, 331–338 (=Thompson 1966, 64–77); Năsturel 1969, 175–185; Wolfram 1988, esp. 83–85; Strzelczyk 1980, 229–250; Alexe 2009, 49–59; Olteanu 1984, 326–345; Heather 1991, 103–107; Heather-Matthews 2004, 102–103; Schäferdiek 1993, 330–339; Girardi 2009, 53–67; Leemans 2012, 201–224; Holubeanu 2015, 66–69.

organization of the Gothic confederation and of their subjects' in north of the Danube, but also in Athanaric's persecutions against the Christians in his area and the martyrs' conduct.

Naturally, the protagonist in the *Passion* was St. Saba. The author of the document displayed Saba's generic profile – his ethnic origin, social and religious status, Christian virtues, etc. –, relevant events concerning his conduct in persecution and, of course, his arrest, torture, execution and transfer of his body to Caesarea.

There were also other minor participants in the *Passion*, as Saba's Christian or heathen fellow-villagers, the persecutors, a Christian presbyter named Sansalas, etc.

It is noteworthy that the author often opposed Saba to others in his attempt to emphasize the saint's virtues as well as his conduct worthy of imitation⁷. Actually, from his point of view Saba was a peerless Christian of the Gothic Church, above all his fellow-believers. His natural place was in the group of saints and, eventually, he his life this way, finished.

In these frequent juxtapositions Saba – others, a peculiar case is represented by Sansalas. Since the public confession of sin that we investigate was placed at the end of the parallel Saba – Sansalas, hereafter we are going to focus our attention on it.

According to the *Passion*, Sansalas was a presbyter, i.e., a Christian priest. It seems that he was in the service of the Christian community wherein Saba himself lived⁸ and was, in all likelihood, a *lector* or a *cantor*⁹. Thus, by their ecclesiastical ranks, Sansalas was a superior of Saba.

When the persecution was initiated in trans-Danubian Gothia, Sansalas left the territory taking refuge on the other bank of the Danube, in *Romania*, i.e., Roman Empire¹⁰. Yet the *Passion* did not blame him for leaving his community at such difficult time¹¹. However, eventually Sansalas returned to it because of the approach of Easter 372.

⁷ The author himself made known this manner of narration in the first lines of the *Passion* by the words: *For this man [i.e. Saba],..., shone out like a light in the firmament, 'in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation' [Phil 2.15] ...*, Heather-Matthews 2004, 104; *Passio Sabae* 1 (216.29–31, Delehaye 1912): Οὗτος γὰρ ... ἐν μέσῳ γενεᾷ σκολιᾷ καὶ διεστραμμένης ἐφάνη ὡς φωστὴρ ἐν κόσμῳ, On this author's method in narration, see also Girardi 2009, 59.

⁸ By contrast, Girardi 2009, 91, n. 77, supposed that Saba and Sansalas lived in two different villages situated not far from each other. The reason for this assumption is due to the fact that Saba did not know about Sansalas' return in trans-Danubian Gothia, see *Passio Sabae* 4 (218.22–25, Delehaye 1912).

⁹ *He [i.e., Saba] sang God's praise in church and this was his special concern*, Heather-Matthews 2004, 105; *Passio Sabae* 2 (217.17–18, Delehaye 1912): ... πᾶλλον ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ καὶ τοῦτο πᾶν ἐπιμελόμενος On Saba's ecclesiastical rank, see also Ionescu 1970, 488; Ionescu 1972, 183–184, 186, 189; Păcurariu 1972, 199; Coman 1979, 269; Coman 2009, 41–43; Alexe 2009, 58; Heather-Matthews 2004, 105, n. 21; Schäferdiek 1993, 333, 359; Lenski 1995, 77; Kulikowski 2007, 119; Girardi 2009, 61 (n. 42), 79; Leemans 2012, 205; Parvis 2014, 70.

¹⁰ *Passio Sabae* 4 (218.23–25, Delehaye 1912).

¹¹ Actually, Sansalas followed the gospel commandment *When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next* (Matt. 10.23). On a similar case, see *The Martyrdom of Saints Agapê, Irenê, and Chionê at Saloniki*, 1, in Musurillo 1979, 281. and n. 4. In respect of this gospel commandment, see also *The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*, 4, (that the author of the *Passion of Saba* had at his hand) in

After having celebrated the festival, Saba and Sansalas were seized by the Gothic persecutors, an event which occurred in the third wave of persecution. It is noteworthy that others Christians in the village¹² were not noticed by the agents of persecution. This must be explained by the fact that both of them were reckoned by the village elders as obstinate Christians and the only two who had refused to hide their religious identity through any kind of cheat¹³.

The *Passion* relates that Sansalas was tied up and held captive on a wagon while Saba walked. Narrating the torture they suffered, the author focused upon Saba who was the main target of the warriors. However, there is a sentence pointing out that Sansalas was put to the rack too¹⁴.

Further, an important difference between the two characters emerged. In spite of the fact that Saba had received most of the torments, the following day, he showed his torturers that his wounds were marvelously healed¹⁵. By contrast, such a healing was not mentioned in Sansalas' instance by the martyr text, although, as we have just seen, he had also been tortured.

There is another important author's remark that distinguishes Saba in the scene as *the just man* (ὁ δίκαιος) whose *patience and faith* was *confirmed by the harshness of his enemies*¹⁶. By this, the author related Saba's marvelous healing to his virtues. Once again, by contrast, he never conferred Sansalas the attribute of *just man*. This suggests that the priest failed rising above the status of mere servant of God, as Saba did¹⁷.

Musurillo 1979, 4–5, *The Acts of St. Cyprian*, 1.5, in Musurillo 1979, 168–171, and, also, Peter of Alexandria, *The Canonical Epistle*, 13, in Roberts, Donaldson 1996, 560–561.

¹² Their fellow-believers are clearly attested by martyr text, see *Passio Sabae* 3, 4 (217.25–36; 218.34–35, Delehaye 1912).

¹³ This inference is based upon the evidence that the persecution had a general character, by the fact that the persecutors took action against all Christians in Saba's village – see *Passio Sabae* 3 (217.25–218.15, Delehaye 1912) –, and not only against the members of clergy, as Sansalas and Saba were. Then again, Saba had been singled out by his refusal to any compromise rather than by his religious status, i.e., a member of the lower clergy. Indeed, the village elders had tried twice to hide Saba together with other Christians of the village before his arrest but they had come up against Saba's obstinacy. As for Sansalas, although the martyr text does not say anything about his public refusal to hide his religious identity, his flight to Roman Empire can also be seen as evidence for his disagreement with any kind of compromise. For this argument, see also Thompson 1955, 337 (=Thompson 1966, 73); Olteanu 1984, 336; Heather 1991, 103. By contrast, Heather-Matthews 2004, 105, n. 21; Leemans 2012, 205, asserted that Saba and, implicitly, Sansalas had drawn their persecutors' attention as members of the clergy.

¹⁴ [*the persecutors*] *carried away by pitiless cruelty against the servants of God [i.e., Saba and Sansalas]*, Heather-Matthews 2004, 107; *Passio Sabae* 4 (219.10, Delehaye 1912): καὶ ἀνηλεῶς φερόμενοι κατὰ τῶν δούλων τοῦ Θεοῦ. See also Mansion 1914, 18; Schmidt 1933, 234; Thompson 1955, 334 (=Thompson 1966, 65–66, 70); Sibiescu 1972, 371; Coman 1979, 269.

¹⁵ *Passio Sabae* 5 (219.13–18, Delehaye 1912).

¹⁶ Heather-Matthews 2004, 107; *Passio Sabae* 5 (219.11–12, Delehaye 1912): Ἀλλὰ τὸ ἀπηνὲς τῶν ἐχθρῶν τὴν ὑπομονὴν καὶ πίστιν συνέστησε τοῦ δικαίου.

¹⁷ Saba is the one who was chosen by Lord *from among his own servants*, Heather-Matthews 2004, 110; *Passio Sabae* 8 (221.23–24, Delehaye 1912): δοξάζοντες τὸν κύριον τὸν ἐκλογὰς ποιούμενον τῶν ἰδίων δούλων αὐτοῦ. receiving thus *the crown of righteousness*, Heather-Matthews 2004, 110:

However, when the persecutors bade them to eat sacrificial meat, Sansalas was the one who refused on behalf of both. Moreover, he made a new step by asking persecutors a death sentence upon them¹⁸. Saba himself immediately approved of the priest's attitude by asserting the almightiness of God and offending Atharidus in the presence of his attendants¹⁹.

Finally, hearing all these, Atharidus passed the sentence, by ordering to kill Saba, but not Sansalas. The latter remained in bonds, and, in all likelihood, not long after he was released²⁰.

There are three paragraphs opening the seventh chapter of the *Passion* that can be regarded as very important on the matter. In them, the author relates Atharidus' sentence and the following events:

VII.1. Finally Atharidus, learning all this [i.e., Saba's refusal to eat sacrificial meat and subsequent events], ordered him [i.e., Saba] to be put to death. Therefore, the servants of lawlessness left the presbyter Sansalas in bonds, and took hold of Saba and led him away to drown him in the river called the Mousaios. 2. But the blessed Saba, remembering the injunction of the Lord and loving his neighbour as himself²¹, said, 'What has the presbyter done wrong, that he does not die with me?' They replied to him, 'This is no concern of yours'. 3. When they said this, Saba burst out in exultation of the Holy Spirit and said, 'Blessed are you, Lord, and glorified is your name, Jesus, for ever and ever, amen: for Atharidus has

Basile the Great, *Ep.* 165 (50.5–6, Girardi 2009): τὸν τῆς δικαιοσύνης ... στέφανον. See, also, below, note 23.

¹⁸ *Passio Sabae* 6 (219.34–220.1, Delehaye 1912).

¹⁹ *There is one Lord, God in heaven; but Atharidus is a man, impious and accursed. And this food of perdition is impure and profane, like Atharidus who sent it*, Heather-Matthews 2004. 108; *Passio Sabae* 6 (220.2–5, Delehaye 1912): Εἷς δεσπότης Θεὸς ἐν οὐρανοῖς ἐστὶν Ἀθάριδος δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἀσεβὴς καὶ ἐπικατάρτος· καὶ ταῦτα ἀκάθαρτά ἐστι καὶ βέβηλα τῆς ἀπωλείας τὰ βρώματα, ὥς καὶ ὁ ἀποστεύας αὐτὰ Ἀθάριδος.

²⁰ See also Bessel 1862, 144; Boehmer-Romundt 1903, 287; Delehaye 1912, 291; Mansion 1914, 12, 17–18; Zeiller 1918, 430–431; Leclercq 1925, 1439; Giesecke 1939, 66; Thompson 1955, 334, 338 (=Thompson 1966, 70, 77); Alexe 1972, 561; Moiescu, Lupşa, Filipaşcu 1957, 64; Năsturel 1969, 179; Ionescu 1970, 486, 488; Ionescu 1972, 185, 190; Alexe 2009, 57; Sibiescu 1972, 361–362, 371–372; Sibiescu 2009, 22; Păcurariu 1972, 197–198; Păcurariu 1991, 111; Păcurariu 1994, 47; Coman 1979, 269; Coman 1983, 252; Coman 2009, 44; Wolfram 1988, 83, 106, 412 (n. 319); Rubin 1981, 37; Rămureanu 1997, 311; Olteanu 1984, 336; Reichert 2012, 133; Schäferdiek 1993, 336–337; Kulikowski 2007, 120; Popescu 2009, 68, 75; Girardi 2009, 57, 99 (n. 120); Cătoi 2009, 432. By contrast, Schmidt 1933, 642, and especially Leemans 2012, 214, 219, asserted that Sansalas died as a martyr too. But, there is no ground for such an assertion. In considering this issue, one must take into account that the author of the *Passion of Saba* had at his hand the *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp* which had made mention not only Polycarp's martyrdom, but also Germanicus'. see *The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*, 3, in Musurillo 1979, 4–5. Therefore, it is rather unlikely that our author would have overlooked such an event that could have further stimulated his readers' Christian feelings. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that Sansalas was completely overlooked into all synaxaria displaying Saba's martyrdom, see Follieri 1962, 257. This would be regarded as evidence that traditionally Sansalas was never considered neither a martyr nor a confessor of the faith (ὁμολογητής).

²¹ Mk. 12.33.

*pierced himself through with eternal death and destruction, and sends me to the life that remains forever; so well pleased are you in your servants, O Lord our God*²².

Our investigation mainly concerns Saba's question regarding Sansalas' fate. However, for a faultless interpretation one must carefully consider the first and third paragraphs immediately preceding and following it, respectively. It is also important the link between the second and third paragraphs.

First of all, one can infer that there is an obvious antagonism between the meanings of the first and the third paragraphs. Both disclose a distinct point of view concerning the part played by every character in the story. The former presents Atharidus as a judge, the two Christians as being judged, Saba further as a convict and Sansalas as one remained under investigation. The latter paragraph changes the sight. According to it, God is the real judge²³, and Atharidus is merely an instrument²⁴ by which the will of God is put into action²⁵. Atharidus again is the main convict since *he was pierced through with eternal death and destruction*. At the same time, Saba is not a convict by being sentenced to death, but the main gainer of the events by getting *the life that remains forever*. Actually, these two paragraphs expose a worldly (or secular) and a spiritual (or theological), respectively, view on the trial.

The author also tried to emphasize the value of spiritual interpretation as the correct one. At the beginning of the third paragraph he stated that Saba uttered his

²² Heather-Matthews 2004, 108–109; *Passio Sabae* 7 (220.16–28, Delehaye 1912): Τότε γνοὺς πάντα ταῦτα Ἀθάριδος κελεύει ἀναιρεθῆναι αὐτόν. Οἱ γοῦν ὑπηρεταὶ τῆς ἀνομίας ἔασαντες τὸν πρεσβύτερον Σανσαλᾶν δέσμιον, παρέλαβον τὸν Σάβαν καὶ ἀπήγαγον πνίξαι παρὰ τὸν ποταμὸν τὸν καλούμενον Μουσαῖον. Ὁ δὲ μακάριος μεμνημένος τῆς ἐντολῆς τοῦ κυρίου καὶ ἀγαπῶν τὸν πλησίον ὡς ἑαυτόν, εἶπεν· “Τί ἡμαρτεν ὁ πρεσβύτερος, ὅτι σὺν ἐμοὶ οὐκ ἀποθνήσκει;” Ἀπεκρίθησαν δὲ αὐτῶν: “Οὐ σὸν ἐστί περὶ τοῦτου διατάσσεσθαι.” Τοῦτο εἰπόντων αὐτῶν, ἀνέκραξεν ἐν ἀγαλλίασει πνεύματος ἁγίου καὶ εἶπεν· “Εὐλογητὸς εἰ, κύριε, καὶ δεδοξασμένος τὸ ὄνομά σου, Ἰησοῦ, εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν. ὅτι Ἀθάριδος μὲν ἑαυτὸν θανάτῳ αἰωνίῳ καὶ ἀπωλείᾳ περιέπειρεν, ἐμὲ δὲ εἰς ζωὴν τὴν αἰεὶ μένουσαν παραπέμπει, ὅτι οὕτως εὐδόκησας ἐν τοῖς δούλοις σου, κύριε ὁ Θεὸς ἡμῶν.”

²³ The same view point, namely, God as the real judge, is expressed at the end of the martyr text: *praising the Lord who chooses the elect from among his own servants*, Heather-Matthews 2004, 110; *Passio Sabae* 8 (221.23–24, Delehaye 1912): δοξάζοντες τὸν κύριον τὸν ἐκλογὰς ποιούμενον τῶν ἰδίων δούλων αὐτοῦ. This sentence, that was borrowed by the author from *The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*, 20, in Musurillo 1979, 16–17, reflects the view of early Christians regarding martyrdom. Referring to Saba's spiritual trainer, St. Basil the Great similarly stated: *he [i.e., Saba's spiritual trainer] too will receive from the righteous judge [i.e., God] the crown of righteousness*, Heather-Matthews 2004, 115; Basil the Great, *Ep. 164* (38.6–8, Girardi 2009): ὃς παρὰ τῷ δικαίῳ Κριτῇ τὸν τῆς δικαιοσύνης στέφανον καὶ αὐτὸς ἀπολήνεται.

²⁴ But an instrument with a real free will. From this point of view, Atharidus' case bears resemblance with Judas Iscariot's. By betraying Jesus, the latter contributed to the salvation of mankind. Nevertheless, Judas received eternal punishment for his act. On this issue, see St. John Cassian 1978, 885 f. (*Conferences*. 6.9).

²⁵ This also explains why Saba, being arrested, refused to flee and remained on the spot when a woman had untied him, and why later he also asked to be executed by his hangmen who were planning to release him. In the first case, he was waiting for divine verdict, while in the second, he asked his hangmen to carry out the divine judgment, i.e., to put into operation the will of God concerning him.

statement being *in exultation of the Holy Spirit*. This is a Biblical manner giving notice of an undeniable truth²⁶. Thus, in author's view, Saba was then illuminated by the Holy Spirit, i.e., by God himself, giving audible expression to an absolute and divine truth and no one should doubt the validity of his words.

It is on the basis of this evidence that the spiritual ground of Saba's martyrdom represents neither his provocative attitude²⁷, nor his low social status²⁸, nor his Gothic origin²⁹, but his pure heart.

In fact, from the theological point of view, the crown of martyrdom is a divine prize and God gives it solely to his pure servants, i.e., *the just men*. It should be noted that Saba himself received it only when he attained his highest spiritual level. In two other previous somehow similar circumstances he had failed in attaining martyrdom, by having only been banished, first time by the village elders³⁰, and then by a persecutor³¹. Very important on the matter, it may be seen that, in both circumstances, Saba had humbly agreed to the sentence as to the will of God³² and had not used every means to be martyred.

As to the link between the second and third paragraphs, this suggests when the spiritual interpretation must be put into operation and when the worldly one should be used for a correct interpretation of the martyr text. The author stated precisely that martyr's exultation was called forth just by warriors' scornful answer: *When they said this [i.e., persecutors' answer], Saba burst out in exultation of the Holy Spirit and said ...*³³. At the same time, there is obvious that the persecutors' answer³⁴ reflects the worldly view, namely, the one according to which they are in power, while Saba's retort, by amending their wrong thought, reflects the spiritual view, namely, God as being in power. Actually, there is a dialog between an

²⁶ See, for example, Lk. 1.41–55, 67–79 and, esp., Lk. 10.21.

²⁷ See Boehmer-Romundt 1903, 287; Giesecke 1939, 66; Moisescu, Lupşa, Filipaşcu 1957, 64; Năsturel 1969, 178; Schäferdiek 1993, 338–339; Heather-Matthews 2004, 103; Alexe 2009, 57; Reichert 2012, 124.

²⁸ Schäferdiek 1993, 338–339, 359.

²⁹ Zeiller 1918, 431; Thompson 1955, 334 (=Thompson 1966, 70); Strzelczyk 1980, 238; Wolfram 1988, 83, 106; Wolfram 2014, 138.

³⁰ *Passio Sabae* 3 (217.36–218.2, Delehaye 1912).

³¹ *Passio Sabae* 3 (218.15, Delehaye 1912).

³² Fulfilling the will of God is Saba's main aspiration. This is clearly attested by the martyr text in the event of his travel to presbyter Gouththikas: *Then Saba realized that it was the will of God that prevented him from proceeding further and told him to return to the presbyter Sansalas; and praising the Lord he turned and went back*, Heather-Matthews 2004, 107; *Passio Sabae* 4 (218.31–34, Delehaye 1912): Τότε συνήκε θέλημα Θεοῦ εἶναι τὸ καλῶν αὐτὸν περαιτέρω διαβῆναι, κελεῖν ἀλλὰ ἀναλῦσαι πρὸς τὸν πρεσβύτερον Σανσαλᾶν· καὶ εὐλογήσας τὸν κύριον ὑπέστρεψεν. In other words, he gladly fulfilled the will of God. See, also, note 25, above.

³³ Heather-Matthews 2004, 109; *Passio Sabae* 7 (220.23–24, Delehaye 1912): Τοῦτο εἰπόντων αὐτῶν, ἀνέκραξεν [Σάβας] ἐν ἀγαλλιάσει πνεύματος ἁγίου καὶ εἶπεν.

³⁴ “*This is no concern of yours*”. Heather-Matthews 2004, 109; *Passio Sabae* 7 (220.22–23, Delehaye 1912): “Οὐ σὸν ἐστὶ περὶ τοῦτου διατάσσεσθαι.”

illuminated man, i.e., Saba, and some spiritually blind men, i.e., the persecutors³⁵. Consequently, to a correct understanding of the *Passion*, the reader always must put into operation the spiritual interpretation for Saba’s deeds, thoughts and statements, and the worldly one for his opponents.

With regard to Sansalas, he is certainly a peculiar case. As one can see, his fate is displayed into the first paragraph reflecting the worldly view – *the servants ... left the presbyter Sansalas in bonds*³⁶ –, but it is overlooked into the third paragraph. This rather suggests that unlike Saba and Atharidus, Sansalas did not receive at the time the final divine sentence, by further remaining under God’s investigation as well as under persecutors³⁷. However, since he lost the crown of martyrdom and could not gain the eternal life, then one would have to assume that he was rather a convict and a loser of the moment.

On the other hand, whatever the worldly motive of his release may have been – his unprovocative attitude³⁸, his great social reputation³⁹, his non-Gothic origin⁴⁰, his providential part in drawing up the *Passion*⁴¹, the persecutors’ lack of enthusiasm⁴², or his old age and imposing appearance⁴³ –, once again another ground has to be assumed on the spiritual level. Actually, the only piece of evidence that the *Passion* provides us with is exactly Saba’s interrogation – “*What has the presbyter done wrong [ἡμαρτεν, i.e., sinned], that he does not die with me?*”⁴⁴. Besides, given that Saba’s thought always expresses the spiritual view⁴⁵, as we have just seen, it is not unreasonable to assume that Sansalas’ spiritual fate overlooked into the third paragraph got its solving just with Saba’s question.

³⁵ The spiritual blindness of the persecutors is clearly stated by Saba’s words to his hangmen just before the martyrdom: ‘... *I see what you cannot see: over there on the other side, standing in glory, the saints who have come to receive me*’, Heather-Matthews 2004, 109; *Passio Sabae* 7 (220.35–221.1, Delehaye 1912): “... ἐγὼ ὁρῶ ὅπερ ὑμεῖς οὐ δύνασθε ἰδεῖν· ἰδοὺ ἄντικρυς ἐστᾶσιν ἐν δόξῃ οἱ ἐλθόντες ὑποδέξασθαι με.”

³⁶ Heather-Matthews 2004, 108; *Pass. Sabae* 7 (220.17–18, Delehaye 1912): Οἱ ... ὑπηρέται ... ἐάσαντες τὸν πρεσβύτερον Σανσαλαῖν δέσμιον, ...

³⁷ See n. 52. below.

³⁸ Contrasting Saba’s provocative attitude, see above, n. 27.

³⁹ Schäferdiek 1993, 338–339, 359.

⁴⁰ See note 29, above. Such explanation for Sansalas’ release has been refuted as inadequate by Rubin 1981, 37, and Reichert 2012, 124, 133.

⁴¹ Cătoi 2009, 432, n. 9.

⁴² Rubin 1981, 37.

⁴³ Suggested by Alexe 1972, 566; Alexe 2009, 57.

⁴⁴ Heather-Matthews 2004, 108; *Passio Sabae* 7 (220.21–22, Delehaye 1912).

⁴⁵ We may add here Saba’s thought reflected in the scene of sacrificial meat preceding his sentenced to death. When the persecutors labeled their leader with the words the ‘*Lord Atharidus*’. Heather-Matthews 2004, 108; *Passio Sabae* 6 (220.2, Delehaye 1912): “Ο δεσπότης Ἀθάριδος”, Saba immediately retorted: “*There is one Lord, God in heaven; but Atharidus is a man, impious and accursed*”, Heather-Matthews 2004, 108; *Passio Sabae* 6 (220.2–4, Delehaye 1912): “Εἷς δεσπότης Θεὸς ἐν οὐρανοῖς ἐστὶν· Ἀθάριδος δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἀσεβὴς καὶ ἐπικατάρτος” ...”. Obviously, there is the same thought as in the scene of his exultation.

Even so, the meaning of the interrogation is somehow obscure. At a first glance, it seems that Saba interceded with persecutors for Sansalas' martyrdom⁴⁶. There are at least two points that could support such an interpretation: first, Atharidus' warriors would appear to be the addressees of the question by being the only ones who answered Saba; second, the author's remark that Saba's question originated in his love for his neighbor. It would follow that, loving his neighbor as himself, Saba tried to gain the same fate for Sansalas, i.e. the martyrdom, by asking the persecutors to martyrize him too⁴⁷.

However, such an interpretation it is rather in keeping with the worldly view and, therefore, it has to be wrong. Following it, one might have thought that Saba did not agree with the will of God stated by Atharidus' sentence, and used every means to change it by getting Sansalas' martyrdom. Yet, putting the will of Saba in opposition to the divine is unacceptable. As a matter of fact, Saba had always tried to follow the divine will as the main goal of his life⁴⁸.

On the other hand, such an interpretation does not clear up Sansalas' case on spiritual level, an important point that could not certainly have been overlooked by the author.

Carefully examining Saba's question, one can see that it consists mainly of two sections. The second one – *that he does not die with me* – merely reflects a reality, namely, that Sansalas was not sentenced to death. As far as its first section is concerned – *What has the presbyter done wrong/sinned* –, it simply pointed out just the spiritual ground of Sansalas' release. There is an evident relationship of cause and effect between these sections wherein the cause is a *sinning* and the consequence is a *releasing*. It can be also seen that Saba neither asked *why the presbyter does not die with me* nor *why do you not kill the presbyter with me*, nor *what about him*⁴⁹, but *what has the presbyter done wrong/sinned that he does not die with me*.

Therefore, the key term in solving the matter⁵⁰ appears to be the verb ἀμαρτάνω (= *to sin*⁵¹). It reveals that Sansalas was defiled by a sin⁵² and it was this

⁴⁶ For such an interpretation, see Rubin 1981, p. 37, n. 22.

⁴⁷ The difficulty in interpreting Saba's words is increased by somehow confused sequence of events narrated into the seventh chapter. See below – note 57 – a brief treatment of this issue.

⁴⁸ See notes 25 and 32, above.

⁴⁹ As St. Peter's inquiry to Jesus, in Jn. 21.21.

⁵⁰ Similar opinions have Sibiescu 1972, 372, and Coman 2009, 44, but they did not discuss the issue at length.

⁵¹ Lampe 1961, 80.

⁵² In this case, one would assume that the *bonds* in which Sansalas was left by persecutors – Οἱ ... ὑπηρέται ... ἑάσαντες τὸν πρεσβύτερον Σανσαλᾶν δέσμιον, *Pass. Sabae* 7 (220.17–18, Delehaye 1912) – also have a spiritual significance. For the spiritual significance of the *bonds* and of their part in the spiritual healing, see also Theodoretus of Cyr. *Historia ecclesiastica*, V. 17–18, and especially the words addressed by St. Ambrose of Milan to Theodosius I in the famous scene of the excommunication of the emperor: "...*Begone. Attempt not to add another crime to that which you have committed. Submit to the restriction (=δεσμών) to which the God the Lord of all agrees that you be sentenced. He will be your physician, He will give you health*". (English translation by Jackson M. A. Blomfield, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series II, vol. 3. Grand Rapids, 328–329).

why God did not accept him then as a martyr and did not confer him the crown of righteousness.

It is also to be noted that the author is fully aware of the moral implications of this verb. He had previously used it once, designating the persecutors in the third wave as *those who make sin* (οἱ ἁμαρτάνοντες)⁵³.

All these mean that Saba's question also comprises the answer. Through it, the author revealed the spiritual reason for presbyter's release to the readers.

As a matter of fact, the Christian has to be a spiritual athlete who runs in the race to receive the incorruptible crown, and the one who breaks the rules of the race by sin no longer wins⁵⁴. A sinner also resembles the offering with defect and, as a result, (s)he is abhorrent to God⁵⁵. (S)he is contaminated by a spiritual disease, and since (s)he is not sincerely preoccupied in attaining the forgiveness and his/her healing (s)he is unworthy of the crown of martyrdom.

To put it briefly, God himself, the real judge or the president of the games, removed Sansalas from martyrdom due to a sin⁵⁶.

Following this interpretation, the real addressee of Saba's question was Sansalas himself, no matter if he was or not on the spot at that time⁵⁷. By expressing his grief

(309.16–19, L. Parmentier ed. *Theodoret, Kirchengeschichte*, V.18, Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1911): "... ἀπιθι τοίνυν, καὶ μὴ πειρῶ τοῖς δευτέροις τὴν προτέραν αὐξίν παρανομίαν καὶ δέχου τὸν δεσμόν, ὃ ὁ θεὸς ὁ τῶν ὅλων δεσπότης ἄνωθεν γίγνεται σύμψηφος· ἱατρικὸς δὲ οὗτος καὶ πρόξενος ὑγείας."

⁵³ *Passio Sabae* 4 (Delehaye 1912, 218.16–17). St. Basil the Great also used the noun ἁμαρτία in his correspondence concerning Saba's martyrdom displaying the spiritual decay of his days: *we have by our excess of sin (τῇ υπερβολῇ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν) even made wild those [i.e., barbarians] who were gentle. It is to ourselves and our sins (ταῖς ἡμετέραις ἁμαρτίαις) that we must assign the blame that the power of the heretics has spread so widely*, Ep. 164, in Heather-Matthews 2004, 116 (40.5–6, 42.1, Girardi 2009).

⁵⁴ 2 Tim. 2.5: *And in the case of an athlete, no one is crowned without competing according to the rules*. See, also, 1 Cor. 9.24–26. On the agonistic metaphors in martyr homilies of the fourth and fifth centuries in the Eastern Church, see Leemans 2003, 29.

⁵⁵ See Lev. 22.20; Deut. 15.21; 17.1; Mal. 1.8, 13.

⁵⁶ Schäferdiek 1993, 339, considered that the author suggested by Saba's inquiry and persecutors' answer the providential intercession in Sansalas' release. However, this is a worldly view, while both the author and Saba had a more complex conception about life.

⁵⁷ Certain scholars placed Saba's inquiry on the way to the river – Sibiescu 1972, 372; Girardi 2009, 101 (n. 127); Cătoi 2009, 432 (n. 9) – or at the place of execution – Coman 2009, 44. In this case, Sansalas did not hear the question from Saba's mouth. However, a closer examination of the martyr text could suggest placing the dialog just before the departure to the river, in Sansalas' face. Actually, in the first paragraph of the seventh chapter, the author displayed Atharidus' sentence and also, briefly, its different consequences on Sansalas and Saba: the former was left in bonds, while the latter was led away to be drown in the river, Delehaye 1912, 220.16–19. Then the author obviously moves his narration back in time, by minutely depicting the events following Atharidus' sentence: 1) Saba and the hangmen dialoging about Sansalas' fate, Delehaye 1912, 220.19–28; 2) Saba uttering thanks to God along the entire road to the river, Delehaye 1912, 220.28–29: Καὶ δι' ὅλης τῆς ὁδοῦ ἀπαγόμενος ἠύχαρισται τῷ Θεῷ. ...; 3) Saba and the hangmen dialoging on the river bank at the end of the walk; 4) Saba being drowned. It seems likely that the first event (1), so long as it had preceded *the entire road*, occurred just before the departure to the place of execution, in front of Sansalas. On the other hand, by the fact that Saba merely put into word by the question his utter astonishment and grief that Sansalas lost the martyrdom, it is a fair inference that such reaction must have occurred as

that the presbyter lost the martyrdom, Saba also revealed to Sansalas why this happened and called him to mend his ways by penance. Thus, the martyr did not try to change the will of God, but to put Sansalas' conduct in accordance with the divine will. In fact, as everyone violates the will of God by sin, so (s)he then fulfils it by penance.

At the same time, by doing so, Saba really expressed his love of neighbor, as the author of the text asserted. The same love of neighbor was the ground of Saba's attempt to mend the wrong conduct of his Christian fellow-villagers in the two first waves of persecution. The first time he openly prevented them all from committing the sin, while the second time he indirectly showed them the true Christian conduct by his own deeds⁵⁸. Elsewhere in the martyr text, the author also stated that Saba always tried to subject *all men to his good example*⁵⁹.

Such an interpretation is also in accordance with St. Cyprian of Carthage's (+258) considerations concerning martyrs intercession for sinners. In his *De Lapsis* (*The Lapsed*), the African bishop stated that a real martyr was never in opposition to God. Cyprian also advised the lapsed Christians not to rescind the Lord's precepts by the agency of the martyrs, but to return to God with their whole heart⁶⁰. And it seems to be this last advice just the essence of Saba's words.

Also it is to be noted that the existence of Saba's question in the martyr text reveals that Sansalas understood its meaning. As it appears from the *Passion*, Sansalas was the only Christian eyewitness of most events after their arrest. That is why he was justly considered the informant of the author⁶¹. In such a position, he

soon as Saba heard the sentence, not later. Placing his interrogation on the way to the river it becomes rather illogical both on spiritual and even on worldly level. For a similar temporal turning in narration, see Lk. 15.20.

⁵⁸ *Passio Sabae* 3 (217.25–218.8, Delehay 1912). On these two events, see also Holubeanu 2015, 67–68.

⁵⁹ Heather-Matthews 2004, 105; *Pass. Sabae* 2 (217.21–22, Delehay 1912): καὶ τῇ ἀγαθῇ προθέσει πάντας ὑποτάσσων.

⁶⁰ "Is any one greater than God, or more merciful than God's goodness, that he should either wish that undone which God has suffered to be done, or, as if God had too little power to protect His Church, should think that we could be preserved by his help? ... I entreat you, beloved brethren, that each one should confess his own sin, while he who has sinned is still in this world, while his confession may be received, while the satisfaction and remission made by the priests are pleasing to the Lord. ... Let us return to the Lord with our whole heart. Let us appease His wrath and indignation with fastings, with weeping, with mourning, as He Himself admonishes us.", Roberts, Donaldson 1996, 1033, 1037–1038; Cyprianus Carthaginiensis 1853, *De Lapsis*, XVII, XXIV (=20, 29) (91.11–14, 105.1–4, 105.11–106.1): An quisquam maior deo aut divina bonitate clementior, qui aut infectum velit quod passus est deus fieri, aut quasi illi minus potestatis ad protegendam ecclesiam suam fuerit, auxilio nos suo putet posse servari? ... Confiteantur singuli, quaeos vos, fratres. delictum suum, dum adhuc qui deliquit in saeculo est, dum admitti confessio eius potest, dum satisfactio et remissio facta per sacerdotes apud dominum grata est. ... Ad dominum toto corde redeamus: iram et offensam eius ieiuniis, fletibus, planctibus. sicut admonet ipse, placemus.

⁶¹ Bessel 1862, 144; Boehmer-Romundt 1903, 287; Delehay 1912, 291; Mansion 1914, 12; Zeiller 1918, 430–431; Leclercq 1925, 1439; Thompson 1955, 338 (=Thompson 1966, 77); Alexe 1972, 560–562; Sibiescu 1972, 361–362, 371–372; Sibiescu 2009, 22; Păcurariu 1972, 198; Păcurariu 1991, 112; Coman 1983, 252; Heather-Matthews 2004, 106, n. 27; Popescu 2009, 68, 75; Cătoi 2009, 432.

did not hide the divine reprimand reflected in Saba's words. One must take into account that, as the only eyewitness of the scene, he could have concealed the truth for the benefit of his public reputation. Actually, up to that time Sansalas had always followed this way by having hidden his sin in front of everyone. Saba, as his bosom and inferior in rank, had not suspected anything. He had not been aware of Sansalas' sin until Atharidus' sentence. Besides, Sansalas' deceptive spiritual profile must have been widespread among his fellow-villagers, either Christian or heathen. A piece of evidence is just his reputation in the village as an obstinate Christian.

The only one whom Sansalas failed to deceive was God⁶². Moreover, reading the martyr text one may infer that God had tried to mend Sansalas' ways by having healed only Saba's wounds. But Sansalas did not take the divine warning into account or was too blind to understand it. He needed a harsher reprimand. And it was only after Atharidus' sentence that Sansalas was really preoccupied in attaining his healing and attempted changing God's verdict.

Therefore, by telling the historical event, Sansalas made a public confession. It is also he who, by Saba's words – *What has the presbyter done wrong/sinned* –, gave up his deceptive reputation and confessed in front of all, either in Cappadocia, or in Gothia, or in all Christian communities of the world that he had been unworthy of the crown of martyrdom due to a sin⁶³.

There is another issue concerning Sansalas' case. Carefully reading the *Passio*, it can be seen that the author strewed the story with additional remarks, even sometimes paying attention to other characters' misdeeds⁶⁴. Furthermore, possessing a thorough theological knowledge, he tactfully hinted at the theological significance of events in the story by not simply depicting Saba's martyrdom.

For instance, in the paragraphs of the seventh chapter referred to above, the author twice attributed motive and sentiment to the martyr. First time, displaying his inquiry, he also specified that Saba had been then driven on by Lord's injunction to love his neighbor as himself⁶⁵. Second time, exposing martyr's retort to persecutors' answer, the author again stated that Saba was then illuminated by the Holy Spirit⁶⁶.

Very important on the issue, elsewhere in the text, depicting the dialog between Saba and an angel that appeared to him, the author, in his attempt to make clear the martyr's attitude, provided detailed information on Sansalas' deeds:

Certain scholars – Năsturel 1969, 179; Ionescu 1970, 486, 488; Ionescu 1972, 190; Rămureanu 1997, 309; Kulikowski 2007, 120 – did not rule out the possibility that Sansalas was the real author of the *Passion*.

⁶² In this respect. Saba's question in the martyr text also becomes a warning to the readers and hearers of the *Passion*, namely, no one can deceive God. On this issue, see also Heb. 3.12, 4.12–13.

⁶³ On the ground of this evidence, it should be concluded – as Coman 2009, 44 already did – that Sansalas was not Saba's virtuous trainer who was praised by St. Basil the Great, *Ep. 164*, (38.5–9, Girardi 2009), as Năsturel 1969, 179–180, Ionescu 1970, 487–488, Ionescu 1972, 183, 188–190, 193, Sibiescu 1972, 365, 375, and Olteanu 1984, 328, supposed.

⁶⁴ See esp. *Passio Sabae* 3.

⁶⁵ *Passio Sabae* 7 (220.19–21, Delehay 1912).

⁶⁶ *Passio Sabae* 7 (220.23–24, Delehay 1912).

Saba replied to the figure [i.e., angel], ‘Sansalas is away from home’. In fact – the author explains – Sansalas was in flight because of the persecution and was spending time in Romania [i.e., Roman Empire], but at that time had just come back to his home on account of the holy day of Easter⁶⁷.

By contrast, approaching Sansalas’ fate in the seventh chapter, the author did not provide any additional information about the sin. He limited himself to simply suggesting why Sansalas had not died as a martyr together with Saba, namely, due to a sin.

This different approach may raise the question: why did the author overlook pointing out the sin as long as he had often exposed clarifying remarks in the martyr text?

The most appropriate answer it would appear to be that, for him, exposing the sin was not to the benefit of the readers. This is in keeping with a statement in the beginning of the *Passion*. Disclosing what his motivation was for writing the martyr text, the author put forward both Saba’s memory and the moral improvement of the believers⁶⁸. This means that he was fully aware of the public impact of the text and, therefore, he always took into account every possible consequence on its readers. That is why, considering that it was likely that divulging the sin could have scandalized or even done harm to other Christians, he preferred to keep silent on this matter.

On the other hand, it is remarkable that the author did not alter the accuracy of the scene, by simply removing Saba’s question from narration. The framework of the text allows such adjustment. The author could have simply removed the second paragraph of the seventh chapter entirely, starting the third paragraph by the words *Then Saba burst out in exultation of the Holy Spirit and said...* or something like that. As a matter of fact, eliminating a sentence that could confuse the readers appears to be preferable to preserving it.

But, such alteration would have significant theological consequences. By it the author would have officially conferred Sansalas the status as a confessor of the faith (ὁμολογητής). Thus, he would have perpetuated the presbyter’s deceptive reputation, would have even made it official in the church, and would have granted Sansalas undeserved public veneration. Besides, on the spiritual level, the author himself would have disregarded the divine will and the public penance that God himself inflicted on Sansalas⁶⁹.

⁶⁷ Heather-Matthews 2004, 106; *Passio Sabae* 4 (220.22–25, Delehay 1912): Ὁ δὲ Σάβας ἀπεκρίθη λέγων αὐτῷ «Σανσαλαῖς ἀποδημεῖ.» Ἦν δὲ ὁ Σανσαλαῖς διὰ τὸν διωγμὸν φυγὼν καὶ χρονίᾳς ἐν τῇ Ῥωμανίᾳ τότε οὖν διὰ τὴν ἁγίαν ἡμέραν τοῦ Πάσχα ἐληλύθει προσφάτως εἰς τὰ ἴδια

⁶⁸ ... for the sake of his [i.e., Saba’s] memory and the edification of the worshippers of God after his liberation in the Lord, he bade us [i.e., the author] not be idle but write of his triumph, HEATHER-MATTHEWS 2004², p. 104; *Passio Sabae* 1 (217.9–11, Delehay 1912): ... μνήμης καὶ οἰκοδομῆς τῶν θεοσεβῶν χάριν μετὰ τὴν ἐν κυρίῳ ἀνάλυσιν αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἡρεμεῖν ἡμῖν ἐπέτρεψεν ἀλλὰ γράψαι τὰς ἀριστείας αὐτοῦ.

⁶⁹ This may also be the place to mention the opposition between Sansalas and the believer who was martyred by chance in the episode of the mass martyrdom of Gothic Christians by fire in their church, see Delehay 1902, col. 560, 9–12 (26 mart). Sansalas was arrested and released, while the latter arrived to the church and suffered martyrdom at the last minute. These opposite cases reveal the

That is why the author, making allowance for every possible consequence, preferred to preserve the sentence into the martyr text, without any other remarks, considering all these implications. Such, Saba's inquiry becomes also the mark by which the author labeled Sansalas' spiritual status. It makes the difference between Sansalas as a sinner or an unworthy of martyrdom, and Sansalas as a confessor of the faith. And, given that the presbyter was overlooked in all synaxaria displaying Saba's martyrdom⁷⁰, we can say that author's solution reached its target.

This explanation suggests that the author, or at least the one who examined Sansalas' case, was not a simple narrator, but a real ecclesiastical judge. Hearing and then writing the *Passion* – or, at least, supervising it –, he interpreted every character's deeds and words, and, very important on the issue, refrained from any kind of additional remarks that might have scandalized or troubled other Christians.

However, such undertaking is rather specific to a bishop because church traditionally assigned such discretionary powers to bishops⁷¹. Indeed, their ecclesiastical position entitled them to decide upon what is to be said or done and what is not. And even if our bishop was not the same with the author of the *Passion*, we can safely concluded that, in drafting up the document, a bishop – more likely St. Betranion of Tomis⁷² – was personally involved. He was the one who supervised the narration and solved the sensitive matters of the story, such as Sansalas' case.

It seems also a fair inference that before drafting the martyr text there had been a very earnest conversation between the bishop and Sansalas, a conversation in which the former had been informed in detail about presbyter's misdeeds. On the ground of this conversation he acted so as to solve the case⁷³.

It is also possible – hypothetically speaking – that the presbyter acknowledged his guilt to the bishop in a form of sacramental confession⁷⁴. In fact, resorting to a cleric as a stage of sacramental penance is clearly attested in the Eastern Church as early as the last years of the third century⁷⁵, and, in the fourth century, the

holiness of the martyrs in trans-Danubian Gothia and the justness of their public veneration in the Roman Empire.

⁷⁰ See note 20, above.

⁷¹ As in applying the canons, see Amann 1933, 756, 784, 807; Ligier 1967, 942–943. See also in Mayer 2010, 159–171, an analysis of St. John Chrysostom's strategy in relation to a specific set of crises.

⁷² Determining the author of *Passion* is the subject of debate. It would be redundant to discuss this issue at length here. See the survey of scholarship on it in Girardi 2009, 53–54.

⁷³ The passages of direct speech in the *Passion of St. Saba* have been judged as being invented or fictive by Heather-Matthews 2004², p. 102, and Leemans 2012, p. 215. Whatever the case, their value on the matter is of no less of importance as long as they shape the thought of the author.

⁷⁴ This hypothesis also advocates the statement that the author was a bishop. At that time, the authoritative minister for penance was still the bishop. The presbyter's and even deacon's ministry was also accepted, but in cases of necessity – as in the case of a dying person and/or in bishop's long absence –, but only with bishop's acceptance. see Vacandard 1908, 840–848; Amann 1933, 770, 777, 803–804; Rondet 1958, 577–578; Ligier 1967, 943; Gy 1988, 104–105; Santantoni 2000, 99. However, given that this was not a case of necessity and, besides, Sansalas himself was a presbyter, the possibility that he confessed his sin to another priest is rather wrong.

⁷⁵ Amann 1933, 770, 777, 809. See also – note 60, above – St. Cyprian's advice to the lapsed.

confession was already a duty for everyone who had performed a serious sin⁷⁶. Moreover, both St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nyssa enlarged the category of sins which ought to have been confessed, beyond traditional interpretation of *ad mortem* sins – *idolatry, murder, and adultery*⁷⁷.

That is why, considering that Sansalas was very affected by the divine punishment received and he even publicly recognized his sinfulness by the agency of Saba's inquiry, it is possible that, in his endeavor to attain the divine forgiveness, the presbyter resorted to the sacramental confession, too. This could also explain why the author was forced to keep the secret on the sin⁷⁸.

Going a step further, if Sansalas had really addressed to the bishop of Tomis in his endeavor to attain the forgiveness of God, then he wouldn't have had his own bishop, i.e., a Nicene⁷⁹, in trans-Danubian Gothia at that time⁸⁰.

In the end, a last question remains: *What had the presbyter Sansalas sinned?* Although the martyr text did not point it out clearly, certain clues can be identified. However, the matter is perplexing and any attempt in solving it cannot go beyond hypotheses. We shall further briefly display some of the clues in the martyr text.

First, Sansalas' incomplete confession is certainly one of those. Therefore, one should consider the harmful consequences by disclosing the sin, not for Sansalas, but for others. Here also it might have been thought that Sansalas' sin was concerned with clerics' state and not with ordinary Christians'. As such, mentioning the sin to ordinary believers would not have any sense⁸¹.

Second, it seems that the sin could have been easily justified or even considered harmless for the spiritual life. In other words it was a deliberate sin, but of such seriousness that Sansalas was not aware of. That is why he considered himself to be entitled to the same extent as Saba to receive martyrdom by asking Atharidus to pass a death sentence upon both of them. Certainly, his sin may not be considered to have been a deadly one – such as idolatry, murder, or adultery.

⁷⁶ It should be noted that the clerics' state in the Church was incompatible with that of the penitents. Both in the Eastern and Western Church, a cleric who performed a mortal sin was removed from priesthood, see Amann 1933, 792, 803; Gy 1988, 103. But, Sansalas' clerical fate is another issue.

⁷⁷ Vacandard 1908, 840, 848–849.

⁷⁸ On the secret of confession in the ancient Church, see Vacandard 1908, 842, 852, 855–859; Amann 1933, 792, 796–798.

⁷⁹ On the Catholic faith of Saba and, implicitly, Sansalas' community, see *Passio Sabae* 2 (217.12, Delehaye 1912), and Thompson 1966, 95; Wolfram 1988, 82; Wolfram 2014, 137; Rubin 1981, 44 (note 56); Alexe 2009, 56; Heather 1986, 293 (n. 13); Lenski 1995, 77–78; Kulikowski 2007, 119. By contrast, Parvis 2014, 67–83, asserted that Saba was an Arian. However, we find that Parvis produced no convincing evidence for his assertion. It is an issue to which we hope soon to return.

⁸⁰ The bishopric vacancy in trans-Danubian Gothia at that time was also surmised by Ionescu 1972, 190; Rămureanu 1997, 310–311; Coman 1983, 256; Schäferdiek 1993, 331; Popescu 2009, 75; Cătoi 2009, 445. Mathisen 2014, 151. On his turn, Wolfram 2014, 138, considered that there was a Catholic *chorepiscopus* among the Goths at that time – i.e., Goddas –, but which did not stay with the main tribe at all times.

⁸¹ See, on the issue, Amann 1933, 807.

Third, Sansalas' flawless reputation in trans-Danubian Gothia could suggest that the priest had not performed the sin there, but rather in the Roman Empire, where he had travelled before.

Fourth, emphasizing Saba's *love of neighbor* in that parallel Saba-Sansalas, one might think that Sansalas did not rise to such a *love of neighbor*⁸². This might imply that his sin particularly violated this gospel commandment.

Finally, in solving the matter one must bear into mind the persecution against Christians in trans-Danubian Gothia that closely followed the peace Roman-Goth treaty of Noviodunum (369). Then, the Gothic leaders tried reinforcing their ancestral religion⁸³ to support the unity of Gothic confederation. This would also involve that the Christians there were considered Roman sympathizers and the persecution was designed to rid Gothia of any religious and political influence of the Empire⁸⁴.

Indeed, there were close links between Gothic Christians and Roman Empire. As already noted⁸⁵, Sansalas himself was their subject by taking refuge south to the Danube to avoid the persecution. St. Basil the Great also referred briefly to the *relief* that Junius Soranus, as contemporary *dux Scythiae*, provided for those suffering persecution [i.e., Christians in trans-Danubian Gothia] for the name of the Lord⁸⁶.

However, it seems that sometimes such contacts went beyond the religious limits and the events in mid-summer 365 could be a test. Then, the Roman commanders received advance warning of a possible Gothic aggression on the Danube⁸⁷ and the agents who had provided such information could have been some Christians in Gothia too⁸⁸. Even the *Passion of Saba* suggests that Junius Soranus, as the military commander of forces in the Roman province of Scythia, had at hand a kind of network in trans-Danubian Gothia which could more than simply to assist his men slinked there⁸⁹. And it is also very likely that Sansalas himself met Soranus in Scythia.

⁸² For a similar assumption, see also Coman 2009², p. 44.

⁸³ Socrates 1995, 269.20–22 (4.33.7); Sozomenos 2004, 820.13–19 (6.37.12). However, Epiphanius 1985, 248.18–25 (*Pan.* 70.15.4), still explains the persecution of Gothic Christians as revenge against Roman emperors.

⁸⁴ The political-religious function of anti-Christian persecution in trans-Danubian Gothia in 369–372 is still suggested by *Passio Sabae* 3 (218.12–15, Delehaye 1912). See also Zeiller 1918, 423; Thompson 1966, 98, 101; Sibiescu 1972, 357, 360; Păcurariu 1972, 195; Păcurariu 1991, 109–110; Păcurariu 1994, 44; Wolfram 1988, 63, 68–69, 84; Rubin 1981, 43–45, 53; Alexe 2009, 55; Popescu 1983, 268–269; Heather 1986, 316–317; Heather 1991, 104–105; Reichert 2012, 124, 138; Heather-Matthews 2004, 18, 96; Schäferdiek 1993, 354–355; Lenski 1995, 81–83; Kulikowski 2007, 117–122; Madgearu 2008, 102; Girardi 2009, 15.

⁸⁵ See note 68, above

⁸⁶ Heather-Matthews 2004, 114; St. Basile the Great, *Ep.* 155. (30.12–13, Girardi 2009): ... καὶ ἦν παρέχῃ ἀνάπανσιν τοῖς διὰ τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ Κυρίου διωκομένοις, ...

⁸⁷ Ammien Marcellin 1984, 76 (26.6.11).

⁸⁸ See, also, Heather 1986, 317; Lenski 1995, 85; Kulikowski 2007, 117–118. Besides, Madgearu 2008, 99, also supposed that a treasure discovered at Gura Ialomitei, on the Gothic bank of the Danube, was a Roman reward for an inhabitant in trans-Danubian Gothia which had given military notice to Roman army in summer 368.

⁸⁹ *These [i.e., Saba's remains] Junius Soranus ... sending trustworthy men transported from barbarian land to Romania [i.e., Roman Empire]*, Heather-Matthews 2004, 104; *Passio Sabae* 8

Therefore, taking into account all the above data, we would have to surmise, with all due caution, that Sansalas' sin was that he had been involved in such secular matters. In fact, such a sin could be easily justified by his conscience. He was a Christian priest in the middle of a heathen people and, by such an undertaking he could think of helping his Christian brothers against their pagan enemy. Besides, if he was not a Goth by race, as his name could suggest⁹⁰, then such a temptation must have been strong enough.

On the other hand, doing so, he violated just the evangelical command to love his neighbor as himself. Actually, as a priest, Sansalas would have to limit himself to preaching the Gospel, rising himself above all – ethnic, religious, political etc. – distinctions⁹¹. He ought to have seen the pagans as his neighbors and also as his (possible) spiritual sons, and not as his enemies. Besides, as result from the martyr text⁹², his heathen fellow-villagers and even some of the persecutors did not fanatically harbor anti-Christian feelings. Such, at least some of them could have received the Gospel message.

This kind of sin can also explain why the author avoided pointing it out. Indeed, by revealing this fact he could have done much harm to Gothic Christianity because it would have meant to arouse undeserved suspicion upon all Christians and especially clerics in trans-Danubian Gothia, and to compromise the preaching of the Gospel in the pagan *barbaricum*.

Whatever Sansalas' sin may be, from theological point of view we may safely infer from this real story that God gives the prize of martyrdom only to the Christians who sincerely love him and their neighbors. He makes no exception in this regard.

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(221.13–15, Delehay 1912): ὅπερ Οὐνιος Σωρανός, ..., ἀποστείλας ἀξιοπίστους ἀνθρώπους, ἐκ τοῦ βαρβαρικοῦ εἰς τὴν Ῥωμανίαν μετένεγκεν

⁹⁰ On the non-Gothic origin of the name *Sansalas*, see Zeiller 1918, 431; Loewe 1922, 277–278; Schmidt 1933, 234; Giesecke 1939, 66, 68; Năsturel 1969, 179; Zgusta 1970, 87; Ionescu 1970, 489–490; Ionescu 1972, 183, 187; Alexe 1972, 567 (but, 561, n. 24: *barbarian name*, without any other explanation); Sibiescu 1972, 371, 374; Strzelczyk 1980, 238; Wolfram 1988, 83; Wolfram 2014, 138; Coman 2009, 45; Reichert 2012, 133, 139; Schäferdiek 1993, 337; Girardi 2009, 99 (n. 120). On *Sansalas* as Gothic name, see Waitz 1840, 43; Mansion 1914, 12; Leclercq 1925, 1439; Moisescu, Lupșa. Filipașcu 1957, 64.

⁹¹ See Lk. 6.27–28; 10.25–37.

⁹² *Passio. Sabae* 3, 7 (217.28–32; 218.3–6; 220.32–33, Delehay 1912).

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