

THE CHRONOLOGY OF PATRIARCH NIKEPHOROS' *SHORT HISTORY*

The *Short History* of patriarch Nikephoros represents a very interesting work from a lot of points of view. First of all, it constitutes together with the *Chronicle* of Theophanes the only source that enables us to reconstruct the history of the Byzantine Dark Centuries. It also attracts our attention by its ambiguous status, since it presents elements that characterize both the genres of history and chronicle. On one side, it describes the events from a limited period of time, comprised between the death of emperor Maurikios and the wedding of Leon the IV-th with Irene the Athenian (602–769). Nikephoros probably aimed to continue the narration of the Byzantine history from where it had been left by Theophylactos Simmocates, that is at the usurpation of the power by Phocas. On the other side, the narration of the events is very concise, similar to that from the chronicles. Nikephoros presents enough presages, portents or strange meteorological phenomena, but this is not a decisive argument, because such facts are often to be found in classicizing histories. He offers some information about the religious controversies of the period, but the part held by the theological questions could even be considered small for a man who dedicated his entire life to the church. At the same time, Nikephoros does not imitate any classical writer, but his style, transparent and clear, is also not very close to the popular tone of most chronicles. An important element, which would permit us to rank the *Short History* in one of the above categories of history or chronicle, is represented by the chronology used by its author.

The only element of absolute chronology to be found in the *Short History* is the indiction, but this is not constantly used during the whole work of Nikephoros. The future patriarch seems not to be interested in creating a unitary chronological system for his work. He confines himself to adopt the chronological hints present in his sources, fact that creates an evident discontinuity between the parts of his history. This is quite obvious if we take into account that he mentions for the first time an indiction at the end of the eighteenth chapter, when he relates the return of the Holy Cross to Jerusalem. All the preceding events, including landmarks such as the overthrow of Phocas, the ascension on the throne of Heracleios or his campaigns against the Persians are not dated in an absolute manner.

Someone could argue that the dating of the events by Nikephoros could respond to their relative importance in his opinion. A simple enumeration of the facts dated by means of the indiction proves undoubtedly the opposite. In chapter 26 is presented the death of the patriarch Sergios and the ascension of the new supreme hierarch, Pyrrhos, in chapter 32, the ordainment of another patriarch of

Constantinople, Paulos and in chapter 58 the coronation of Constantine the V-th by his father Leon. No other crowning is dated which such accuracy and more are the patriarchs whose ascension (Anastasios, chap. 62, Constantine chap. 72), replacement (Constantine, cap. 84) or death (Anastasios, chap. 72) is not exactly situated in time.

No other mention of an indiction is to be found till the last part of the *Short History*, where the use of this chronological landmark becomes general, at least from chapter 83 onwards¹. Most probably, Nikephoros draws now his inspiration from another source, which pays more attention to chronology. Almost every event is now dated, regardless of its importance. The author tells us the years when a lot of very different facts, of unequal relevance, occurred: the conclusion of the peace with the Bulgarians (77), a failed Arab attack against Sicily (78), the campaign of Constantine the V-th in Bulgaria in order to overthrow Umaros (79), the persecutions against monks and high iconodule officials (83), the restoration of the aqueduct built by emperor Valentinianus (85), the birth of another son of Constantine, Anthimos, the renovation of some churches, the redemption of prisoners from the Slavic tribes (86), the coronation of Eudokia, the emperor's wife, and of his sons (87), the wedding of Leon with Irene and Irene's coronation (88). In the final part of the *Short History* not only the chronology becomes more rigorous, but also the number of facts presented per period of time increases².

In addition, the mentioning of the month besides that of the indiction is here more frequent than in the other parts of the work. We come across it in chapter 83 (τὸν Αὐγουστον μῆνα τῆς τετάρτης Ἰνδικτιόνος), 84, 87 and 88 (ὀγδόῃ δὲ Ἰνδικτιόνι [...] τῷ Δεκεμβρίῳ μηνί), while in all the rest of the *Short History* only two similar cases are detectable (chapters 32, 58). In this last chapter we find the most precise date from all the work of Nikephoros, that of the crowning of Constantine the V-th (πέμπτῃ καὶ εἰκάδι τοῦ Μαρτίου μηνός, τῆς τρίτης Ἰνδικτιόνος, τῇ σωτηρίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἀναστάσει).

Besides the indiction no other element of absolute chronology that is usual in chronicles is employed by Nikephoros. In his work are to be found as dating means neither the years which have passed since the Genesis or since the birth of Christ, nor those of the emperor's reign or patriarch's pastorate, the Olympiads or the consulates. This way, most of the events presented by Nikephoros are devoid of dating, fact that renders more laborious the task of the historians eager to situate them exactly in time. To the imperfections of the chronological system used by the patriarch we should add, although this does not regard the purpose of our present paper the great number of erroneous datings that have been pointed out by the researchers.

If the absolute chronology of the *Short History* is not at all satisfying, still, Nikephoros creates a system of relative time hints able to content a reader without scientific concerns. The year of the event is mentioned some times not in an absolute manner, but with regard to another event, which, for the most times, is not

¹ We find dating by means of the indiction in the chapters 78, 79, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88.

² To the years 741–762 from the reign of Constantine are dedicated the chapters 64 to 88.

exactly dated. For example, in chapter 65 the sending of Artabazos' son Niketas as commander of the Armeniakon army and the crowning of Nikephoros are placed in the next year (Τῷ δὲ ἐξῆς ἐπιγενομένῳ ἐνιαυτῷ). Looking back, we find that the previous year was that of the death of emperor Leon III after twenty-four years of reign, event that is not dated in an absolute manner.

Unlike other historians which, adopting the method of Thucydides, use the seasons as chronological hints in strict correlation with the years, Nikephoros resorts sometimes to seasons by themselves. The unsuccessful Arab siege of Nicaea (chapter 61) is said to have taken place in the next summer (τῷ δὲ ἐπιγενομένῳ θέρει), but what does *next* mean for Nikephoros? The year that followed to the rebellion of the inhabitants of Greece and the Cycladic islands against the iconoclastic measures taken by emperor Leon. Those were determined by the eruption of the volcano from Santorini, considered by the emperor as a sign of the divine wrath for the veneration of the icons. In accordance to Nikephoros this eruption occurred those years (κατὰ τοὺς χρόνους ἐκεῖνους) that is relatively simultaneous to the third indiction mentioned previously in chapter 58. All this retrospective research still does not allow the reader to find out the exact year of the Arab attack of Nicaea. The same happens in the case of the hard frost described in chapter 74 and situated vaguely during the autumn (ὥρα [...] φθινοπώρου).

On other occasions, Nikephoros mentions the month, without specifying the year. For example, in chapter 56 the withdrawal of the Arab troops that were besieging Constantinople is dated in the 15-th of the next month of August (πεντεκαδεκάτῃ δὲ τοῦ ἐπεισίδοντος μηνὸς Αὐγούστου), but neither from the previous or following chapters the reader can infer the year of this happening. Also, in chapter 45 where is described the revenge expedition sent by Justinian the II-nd against the inhabitants of Cherson, Nikephoros informs us only that the shipwreck of the fleet headed by patrician Stephan took place in October (μηνὸς Ὀκτωβρίου ἐνισταμένου). No other date, which should permit us to locate the event, is offered.

More frequently, Nikephoros specifies the duration of a certain event, but is not interested in the moment when it began or ended. It is the case of the emperors' reigns, whose length is almost always mentioned after the death or the abdication of the sovereign. We come across only few exceptions: the rule of Heraklonas, the first reign of Justinianus the II-nd (chapter 40) and that of Anastasios the II-nd (chapter 51). Despite the lack of absolute time specifications this practice creates an approximate chronological background, which helps the reader orientate throughout the Byzantine history. The same role is played by the indication of the duration of some other events, like the fight between Anastasios and Theodosios (chapter 51, ἐπὶ μηνί τε ἕξ τὰ τῆς μάχης διήρκεσε), the second Arab siege of Constantinople (chapter 54, τρισκαίδεκαμηναῖον χρόνον ἐν τῇ προσεδρία διανύσαντες) or the plague which ravaged Constantinople in 747–748 (chapter 67, παρέτελλε δὲ τὰ τῆς θραύσεως μέχρις ἐνιαυτοῦ).

Besides the elements of strict chronology, Nikephoros uses a lot of relative temporal determinations, which allow him to construct a clear and varied narration. For example, the passing by of a short period of time is indicated by at least nine different expressions (ὀλίγου δὲ χρόνου διηπύσαντος, 3, ὀλίγου παρωχηκός χρόνου, 35, βραχὺν διατρίψας χρόνον, 64, μετὰ χρόνον οὐ πολὺν, 67, οὐ πολὺς δὲ χρόνος ἐν μέσῳ, 20, οὐ πολὺ δὲ τὸ ἐν μέσῳ, 66, οὐ μετὰ πολὺ, 16, 19, μετ' οὐ πολὺ, 73, 83, 84, μετ' ὀλίγον, 71). And the number of lexical variants increases much, if we take into consideration all the ways in which Nikephoros expresses the lapse of time (χρόνος δὲ διήρχετο, 4, χρόνος δὲ τις παρώχετο, 9, χρόνου δὲ ἱκανοῦ διελθόντος, 25, χρόνου δὲ μεταξὺ παρελθόντος, 63, χρόνου δὲ τινος διωχηκός, 72 etc.). A similar richness may be observed in the case of the means of conveying simultaneity (τηνικαῦτα, 69, ἐν τούτοις, 2, 8, 17, ἐφ' οἷς, 8, καθ' ἣν, 12, τούτῳ τῷ χρόνῳ, 24, 55, ἐν δὲ τῷ μεταξὺ, 41, ὑπὸ δὲ τούτῳ τὸν χρόνον, 68, ὑπὸ δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν καιρὸν, 18, 22, 86). All these devices which contribute undoubtedly to create a pleasant narration, do not compensate however the chronological shortcomings of the *Short History*.

In conclusion, patriarch Nikephoros doesn't even try to create a chronological system for his work. The few absolute time data spread along the *Short History* are based on the indiction and due to an uncritical taking over from different sources. From this point of view the *Short History* shouldn't be ranked among the chronicles, because even the poorest works of this type are more concerned about chronology. In exchange, Nikephoros is content with few relative chronological criteria, which may have pleased the modest reader of his time, but transform the work from an authentic history into a simple, unpretentious narration of historical facts.

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