

Preface

On September 24, 1724, in the Saint George Patriarchal Cathedral in Constantinople, the *protosynkellos* Sylvester was ordained bishop and then elected Patriarch of Antioch and All the East. Antioch was a famous Orthodox Church with a respectable tradition dating back to the first years of Christianity. It was the beginning of Sylvester's long and varied activity in the service of the Orthodox Church. It marked the starting point of his struggles to defend Orthodoxy in his eparchy, confronted at the time with the most intense challenges ever. Sylvester's election as Patriarch also marks the beginning of the story in this book, as it provides the first written evidence about him. The Patriarch's journeys, alongside his actions and multiple interests, will unfold over the course of the next chapters, revealing his largely unknown personality. The following pages are just an attempt to present it in its various aspects.

The historian's work is like that of a detective: he assembles pieces of information to form an image, like a large jigsaw puzzle. For some historical periods or geographical areas, especially those further removed from the present, not all the pieces of the puzzle are readily available. However, this is another subject altogether. The issue with the sources for the topic of this book is not so much a lack thereof, as their extremely diverse nature. The fact that not all sources have yet been found complicates the historian's work.

Who was Sylvester of Antioch? Concise answers to this question, found in encyclopedias and general histories, in both printed and online versions, inform the reader about his personality.¹ But the next question is whether these short biographies are reliable and complete. Apart from two scholarly articles published more than a century ago and an unpublished PhD thesis, no serious attempt has been made yet to write a monograph about this important leader of the Church

1 “Σίλβεστρος, πατριάρχης Ἀντιοχείας”, *Μεγάλη Ἑλληνικὴ Ἐγκυκλοπαίδεια*, vol. 21. *Ραβέννα-Σκούδον*, Athens, 1938, p. 838; G. D. Metallēnos, “Σίλβεστρος, Πατριάρχης Ἀντιοχείας”, *Θρησκευτικὴ καὶ Ἱθικὴ Ἐγκυκλοπαίδεια*, vol. 11. Σβάρτσερ – Φυλακτήριον, Athens, 1967, col. 150–151; V. Pheidias, “Σίλβεστρος (; –1766). Πατριάρχης Ἀντιοχείας”, in *Εκπαιδευτικὴ Ἑλληνικὴ Ἐγκυκλοπαίδεια. Παγκόσμιο Βιογραφικὸ Λεξικόν*, vol. 9A, Athens, 1988, p. 257; P. M. Kitromilidēs, *Κυπριακὴ λογιόσυνη 1571–1878. Προσωπογραφικὴ θεώρηση*, Nicosia (Lefkosia), 2002, p. 252–254; K. Kokkinoftas, “Οἱ Κύπριοι Πατριάρχες Ἀντιοχείας Σίλβεστρος (1724–1766), Ανθέμιος (1791–1813) καὶ Σπυρίδων (1891–1898)”, *Επετηρίδα Κέντρου Μελετῶν Ἱεράς Μονῆς Κύκκου*, 3, 1996, p. 311–329; C. A. Panchenko, “Сильвестр, патриарх Антиохийский”, in *Православная энциклопедия*, vol. LXIII, Moscow, 2021, p. 351–355.

of Antioch.² Some may argue that such monographs or historical biographies are nowadays obsolete, but this is another discussion, surpassing by far the aim of this introduction. And as long as such books are produced about other individuals in world history, there is no reason to consider this scientific approach as outdated. The following pages will hopefully prove that both professional historians and the public may find it useful. Theologians, historians of printing, and art historians could also benefit from the new data provided henceforth.

In some aspects of the research of Sylvester's activity, progress was made in recent years, in areas such as his institutional relations with the Ottoman authorities or his printing activity. Nevertheless, there is a lot more to be done, as proven by new and previously unknown sources and by material that has not yet been fully explored. A lot of open questions remain concerning the topic of the printing presses established by Sylvester, on which there are a lot of unknowns. What books were printed, and do we have a complete list? Was there a printing press in Bucharest, and if so, which books were published there? And most importantly, where are the copies of the books printed by Sylvester now? Is there an explanation for the fact that they are so rare, and, in many cases, there is only one known copy?

For most of the modern scholars dealing with this topic, the year 1724 marks a turning point in the history of the Church of Antioch. Encyclopedias and general histories consider this date as the starting point of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church of Antioch. Some patriarchal lists for both the Melkite and the Orthodox Church begin with this year, and the date is considered of paramount importance by both Antiochian Churches.³ It is also stressed that this year marked the beginning of a succession of ethnic Greek patriarchs on the throne of the Orthodox Church of Antioch, continuing until the late 19th century, with all the implications of this fact, especially during the “century of the nations”. On the 300-year anniversary of the

² The two articles are: K. Karnapas, “Ο πατριάρχης Ἀντιοχείας Σίλβεστρος ὁ Κύπριος”, *Νέα Σιών*, 2, 1905, p. 191–206, 525–541; 3, 1906, p. 28–43, 364–389, 471–485, 602–617; 4, 1906, p. 49–67, 290–313, 429–444, 498–513; 5, 1907, p. 54–69, 361–378, 638–652, 846–867; and I. Sokolov, “Антиохийский патриарх Сильвестр (1724–1766 г.). Исторический очерк”, in *Сообщения Императорского православного палестинского общества*, XXIV, 1913, 1, p. 3–33. The PhD thesis is V. Nassour, *Σίλβεστρος πατριάρχης Αντιοχείας (1724–1766) κατά τις αραβικές και ελληνικές πηγές*, Thessaloniki, 1992 (unpublished). See <http://hdl.handle.net/10442/hedi/2014> (accessed June 15, 2024). See also Phōtios, Episkopos Palmyras, “Ο Πατριάρχης Ἀντιοχείας Σίλβεστρος”, *Ὁρθοδοξία*, 29, 1954, 1, p. 49–57.

³ It should be noted that the term “Melkite” was used before 1724 for the entire Patriarchate of Antioch, sometimes called by Western sources “Greek”.

separation, in 2024, the two Churches prepared several books and organized conferences in order to collect scholarly opinions on the related topics.⁴

For most contemporaries, the events of 1724 were neither new nor unheard of. Contested hierarchs and even patriarchs were a reality in the previous decades and centuries. The most recent was the quarrel and the disputations between Athanasios Dabbās and Kyrillos V ibn al-Zaʿīm, which ended in 1694 with a compromise, the former deciding to recognize the latter's patriarchal claims in exchange for the Metropolitan throne of Aleppo and guaranties that in due course he would be acknowledged as Kyrillos's successor.

Not new either was the struggle, often fierce, among different factions, clans, and even influent families inside the Antiochian Orthodox Christian community. This struggle was reflected in the choice of persons representing the community in relation with the local and central authorities. Local factions also played a part in the 18th century, as in the previous period. Every one of the most important centers of the community, such as Damascus, Aleppo, Beirut, and Tripoli had its particularities that had to be considered by any leader who wanted to impose his authority over the Church of Antioch. There were also the smaller communities in the villages across modern-day Syria and Lebanon. Merchant Antiochian Christian diasporas existed in Egypt and Constantinople.

Another phenomenon, easy to notice in the events of 1724, was the involvement of foreign actors such as the French and English diplomats in Aleppo and Constantinople and Roman Catholic missionaries. The fact was also customary, as the various factions had often tried to enlist foreign help in their disputes.⁵

Catholic influences were not new, and Rome had made considerable efforts in the past centuries to obtain some sort of formal allegiance from the Antiochian Church. In fact, after Kyrillos Ṭanās's election in 1724, the Pope was reluctant at first to send him a *pallium*, and thus, his official recognition as Patriarch of Antioch.

The reasons were not as much confessional or ideological, as Kyrillos seemed more devoted to Rome than his opponent, the Orthodox Sylvester; but rather the

4 For example, the conference “The Orthodox Church of Antioch from the 15th to the 18th century: towards a proper understanding of history” was convened by the Saint John of Damascus Institute of Theology of the University of Balamand, Lebanon, on October 16–18, 2023. The Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome and the Arab Christian Documentation and Research Center at the Saint Joseph University of Beirut have prepared a book and an academic event on the topic “The Split in the Greek Patriarchate of Antioch Three Centuries Later (1724–2024). Retrospective and Prospect”, forthcoming.

5 For the general situation of the time, see C. Santus, *Trasgressioni necessarie. Comunicazione in Sacris, coesistenza e conflitti tra le comunità cristiane orientali (Levante e Impero ottomano, XVII–XVIII secolo)*, Rome, 2019, p. 65–88.

result of a realistic evaluation of the situation on the ground. It was not clear how much Kyrillos was in control of the Antiochian Church and, even with his powerful supporters, what his perspectives of maintaining his position were. For long periods, he was away in the mountains, far from the urban centers, and, except for a short period of time, he failed to secure from the Ottoman authorities a *berat*, the official document confirming his office.

After all, the Roman See was eager to obtain the allegiance of the Melkite Church of Antioch as a whole and it was not its intention, at least in the beginning, to create a smaller, dissenting, Greek Catholic Church. Such an institution would have proven difficult to defend and support in the established Ottoman system, as its members, while being Ottoman subjects, were no longer Orthodox (*Rûm*) and they were not Catholics (Latins) either. Eventually, Rome accepted the *status quo* and the creation of a new, dissident Church, and therefore, it sent the *pallium* to Kyrillos. The condition imposed by Rome to its Catholic missionaries was to respect the “Greek” rite of the new Church of Antioch and not impose the Latin one.⁶

The Ottomans eventually recognized *de facto* the existence of the Greek Catholic group. The *de jure* recognition from the Ottoman authorities came much later, in the 1830s.⁷

However, as previously stated, the year 1724 did not bring about sudden changes in the religious life of the Christian communities of the ancestral Church of Antioch. Changes took place over long decades, and they were influenced and determined by various historical, political, and cultural circumstances. Among these, the production and distribution of printed books played a significant part.

As for Sylvester, it is not certain that he considered himself a “Greek”, let alone the first Greek patriarch in centuries, as opposed to the rest of his community, composed for the most part of “Arabs” or Arabic-speaking Christians. When considering the 18th century realities, the question of identity is far more complex, especially in those geographical areas. Yet again, the diverse sources can provide some answers to rather difficult and sometimes anachronistically formulated questions. The aim

6 For Rome’s attitude towards the Oriental Churches, see Santus, *Trasgressioni necessarie*, p. 169–198.

7 H. Petermann, *Reisen im Orient*, 1, Leipzig, 1860, p. 112; C. Charon, “L’émancipation civile des Grecs Melkites (1831–1847)”, *Échos d’Orient*, 9, 1906, 60, p. 270–277, and 61, p. 337–344; J. Nasrallah, R. Haddad, *Historie du mouvement littéraire dans l’Eglise Melchite du V^e au XX^e siècle. Contribution à l’étude de la littérature arabe chrétienne*, vol. IV. *Époque Ottomane 1516–1900*, 2, 1724–1800, Louvain/Paris, 1989 (henceforth Nasrallah, Haddad, HMLÉM IV.2), p. 45; B. Masters, “The Establishment of the Melkite Catholic Millet in 1848 and the Politics of Identity in Tanzimat Syria”, in P. Sluglett, S. Weber (eds.), *Syria and Bilad al-Sham under Ottoman Rule. Essays in Honour of Abdul Karim Rafeq*, Boston/Leiden, 2010, p. 455–473, especially p. 459–464.

of this book is to provide answers, as much as possible, to some of the more relevant questions about Sylvester's life and activity. However, its purpose is not to challenge or try to demolish historical considerations dating back decades, or even centuries. Nevertheless, a return to the period reports is always useful for the historian. Reading again more or less known sources, while trying to find new ones, is also helpful in most cases.

