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On Leontius' Origin and Career up until the Year 481/482*

O pochodzeniu Leoncjusza i jego karierze do roku 482

Abstract

This article discusses the usurper Leontius' origin and career up until the year of 481/482. He was most likely born in a family belonging to the circles of provincial aristocracy, which enabled him to receive a good education. As for his ethnicity, contrary to a rather popular scholarly opinion that he was from Isauria, he might just as well have come from Syria (as Theophanes points out directly). Regarding his position as magister *militum per Thracias*, it seems that he could have held it in the years 478–482 (there is no certainty that he exercised this function in 484). He probably had known Illus before 481/482.

Abstrakt

Artykuł poświęcony jest pochodzeniu i karierze Leoncjusza (do roku 481/482). Urodził się on zapewne w rodzinie należącej do kręgów prowincjonalnej arystokracji, co umożliwiło mu odebranie dobrego wykształcenia. Co do pochodzenia etnicznego, to wbrew dość powszechnej w nauce opinii, że pochodził z Izaurii, trzeba wskazać, że równie dobrze można uznać, że wywodził się z Syrii (o czym bezpośrednio mówi Teofanes). Co do pełnienia przez niego

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stanowiska magister *militum per Thracias*, to wydaje się, że mógł je sprawować w latach 478–482 (nie ma pewności, że był nim w 484 r.). Najpewniej znał się z Illusem jeszcze przed 481/482 r.

Keywords: Leontius, Illus, emperor Zeno (474–491), usurpations in Byzantium

Słowa kluczowe: Leoncjusz, Illus, cesarz Zenon (475–491), uzurpacje w Bizancjum

The emperor Zeno, an Isaurian by origin, had to face usurpers who wanted to deprive him of his power several times during his 17-year long reign¹. One of such attempts, in fact – the last one, was the rebellion of Illus, a long-

¹ At the very beginning of his reign (for more on the topic, see: R. Kosiński, *The Emperor Zeno. Religion and Politics*, Cracow 2010; P. Crawford, *Roman Emperor Zeno: The Perils of Power Politics in Fifth-century Constantinople*, Yorkshire–Philadelphia 2019) in January of 475 Zeno had to face the usurpation of Basiliscus, the uncle of his wife Ariadne, who was supported by Verina, the emperor's mother-in-law, and the generals Armatus (likely Basiliscus' nephew), Illus with his brother Trocundes and Theodoric Strabo, the leader of the Goths. Zeno had to flee from Constantinople, to which he returned in August of 476, deposing Basiliscus from the throne. On the usurper's career and his fate, see e.g.: E.W. Brooks, *The Emperor Zeno and the Isaurians*, "English Historical Review" 1893, vol. 8, p. 216–218; J.R. Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. II, A.D. 395–527, Cambridge 1980, p. 212–214 (s.v. *Fl. Basiliscus* 2), further: *PLRE* II); M. Salamon, *Basiliscus cum Romanis suis*, [in:] *Studia Moesiaca*, ed. L. Mrozewicz, K. Iłski, Poznań 1994, p. 179–196; M.J. Leszka, *Empress-Widow Verina's Political Activity during the Reign of Emperor Zeno*, [in:] *Mélanges d'histoire byzantine offerts à Oktawiusz Jurewicz à l'occasion de son soixante-dixième Anniversaire*, ed. W. Ceran, Łódź 1998, p. 128–133; J. Prostko-Prostyński, *Basiliskos: Ein in Rom anerkannter Usurpator*, "Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik" 2000, Bd. 133, p. 259–263; K. Feld, *Barbarische Bürger. Die Isaurier und das Römische Reich*, Berlin 2005, p. 241–260; M.J. Leszka, *Illus Izauryjczyk wobec uzurpacji Bazyliskosa*, "Acta Universitatis Lodziensis". Folia Historica 2005, vol. 80, p. 45–49; K. Twardowska, *Cesarzowe bizantyjskie 2 poł. V w. Kobiety i władza*, Kraków 2009, p. 109–124; R. Kosiński, *op. cit.*, p. 79–97; M.J. Leszka, *The role of Empress Verina in the events of 475/476 – revisited*, "Byzantinoslavica" 2017, vol. 75, p. 30–42.

Three years later Marcian rebelled against Zeno, the emperor's brother-in-law, husband of Leontia, Ariadne's sister. It was pacified, among others, thanks to Illus' support. On Marcian and his rebellion: W. Ensslin, *Marcianus* 35, [in:] *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (hereafter: *RE*), Bd. XIV, 2, Stuttgart 1956, kol. 1519; *PLRE* II, p. 717 (*Marcianus* 17); M.J. Leszka *Bunt Marcjana w Konstantynopolu (479)*, [in:] *Z badań nad wczesnobizantyjskim Konstantynopolem*, ed. M.J. Leszka, K. Marinow, A. Kompa, Łódź 2011 ("Acta Universitatis Lodziensis". Folia Historica 87), p. 215–225; Ch. Begass, *Die*

time associate of the emperor, who orchestrated the proclamation of Leontius, whose life up until this event is going to be the subject of my research.

Not much is known of Leontius² life before he joined Illus. We do not know when he was born. It is doubtful that he was a young man at the time of his imperial proclamation, considering also the fact that some time before this event he was also a *magister militum per Thracias*. It can be assumed that he must have been born at the latest in the early 50s (thus, at the beginning of the 80s he would have been more than 30 years old), and probably earlier. We have an unclear overview of his origin. John of Antioch claims that Leontius came from Dalisandos³. He does not, however, say where it was located. Neither does he inform of his ethnic origin. Some scholars claim that he meant Dalisandos that lies close to Claudiopolis⁴, and based on that they hypothesise on Leontius' possible Isaurian origin⁵. Theophanes also discusses the subject of Leontius' ethnicity. In his *Chronographia* he first mentions that Leontius was Syrian, then in another passage, he adds that Leontius' home town was Chalkis⁶. This city is located in Syria, however, Theophanes does not bring that specific information up. The fact that Theophanes indicated Syria as the place of Leontius' birth twice seems to be a major point in favour of the Syrian origin of this article's hero. It should also be noted that the name Leontius was quite popular in Syria⁷, however, that does not have to be treated as a significant clue.

Senatsaristokratie des oströmischen Reiches, ca. 457–518. Prosopographische sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen, München 2018, p. 185–186, 293–295.

² Basic information on Leontius: W. Ensslin, *Leontius*, [in:] *RE*, Suppl. Bd. VIII, c. 939–941; *PLRE* II, p. 670–671 (s.v. *Leontius* 17); Ch. Begass, *op. cit.*, p. 175–177.

³ *Ioannis Antiocheni Fragmenta quae Supersunt Omnia*, 237.2, rev. S. Mariev, Berolini et Novi Eboraci 2008 (hereafter: John of Antioch).

⁴ F. Hild, H. Hellenkemper, *Kilikien und Isaurien*, Teil 1, Wien 1990 (=Tabula Imperii Byzantini, Bd. 5.1), p. 233–234.

⁵ E.W. Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 225, n. 101; W. Ensslin, *Leontius...*, kol. 939. The view that Leontius was of Isaurian origin became established in the scholarship. E.g.: J. Kulakovkij, *Istorija Vizantii*, vol. I, London 1973, p. 372; H. Elton, *Illus and the Imperial Aristocracy under Zeno*, "Byzantion" 2000, vol. 70, p. 399; R. Kosiński, *op. cit.*, p. 148; A. Kiel-Freytag, *Betrachtungen zur Usurpation des Illus und des Leontius (484–488 n.Chr.*, "Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik" 2010, Bd. 174, p. 292.

⁶ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, rev. C. de Boor, AM 5976, Lipsiae 1883, p. 129 (hereafter: Theophanes).

⁷ Ch. Begass, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

As for the arguments against Isaurian origin of Leontius, the reservations of Glanville Downey⁸ are still valid – there can be no certainty that John of Antioch meant Dalisandos in Isauria and not the other town of the same name – we know those existed and the chance of one being located in Syria cannot be excluded. Downey's reasoning indicates a possibility that the passages in the work of John of Antioch do not contradict those of Theophanes'. Even if it were the case, there is still the question why Theophanes clearly writes that Leontius' home town was Chalkis. Thus, if we accepted Theophanes' information on the Syrian origin of Leontius, then why not also agree that he was born in Chalkis and John of Antioch simply made a mistake. There is no reason to make an a priori claim that the sources of John of Antioch were more reliable than those of Theophanes. Consequently, there is also other evidence against the Isaurian origin of Leontius in the chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite, in which it is claimed that Illus did not proclaim himself as an emperor because of his Isaurian origin⁹. It clearly indicates that Leontius was not an Isaurian, or at least, unlike Illus, was not seen as one.

The Slavic translation of the *Chronographia* of John Malalas states that Leontius was a Thracian. However, it is commonly perceived as a mistake, and rightfully so¹⁰.

It is apparent from the above arguments that only Theophanes gives a clear overview on the subject of Leontius' origin; he calls Leontius a Syrian and points to Chalkis as his place of birth. The idea of Isaurian origin of Leontius is

⁸ G. Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest*, Princeton–New Jersey 1961, p. 494, n. 95.

⁹ *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite*, 14, transl., notes and introduction F.R. Trombley, J.W. Watt, Liverpool 2000 (hereafter: Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite).

¹⁰ V.M. Istrin, *Hronika Ioanna Malaly v slavjanskom perevode*, Moskva 1994, p. 340 (hereafter: John Malalas (slav.)). This mistake likely resulted from the fact that Leontius was a *magister militum per Thracias* (see eg. *PLRE* II, p. 670). If it was so, then the Slavic translator must have had a more complete version of John Malalas' chronicle, since the known Greek version of the source lacks information of Leontius serving in the said office. On the various manuscripts of the *Chronographia* of John Malalas – P. Janiszewski, *Historiografia późnego antyku (koniec III – połowa VII w.)*, [in:] *Vademecum historyka starożytnej Grecji i Rzymu*, vol. III, *Źródłoznawstwo czasów późnego antyku*, ed. E. Wipszycka, Warszawa 1999, p. 173–174.

based only on the name Dalisandos, which was brought up by John of Antioch and is nowadays connected with the Isaurian territories¹¹.

As for the social standing of Leontius, we only have the information from John of Antioch. The historian claims that he came from lower social classes¹². There may be some reservations regarding the above information's credibility when we contrast it with the passage in Theophanes, who claims that Leontius was a well-educated man¹³. This does not necessarily have to undermine what John of Antioch has said, since there are examples known of people who managed to get education, yet could not boast of having an illustrious and rich family. However, if we take into account that John Malalas mentions the name of Leontius' mother – Paulina¹⁴ – the said reservations become validated. Maciej Salamon¹⁵ accurately notices that naming the mother of Leontius may indicate that she was of notable lineage. It would fit well with Theophanes' claims on the good education of this article's hero and the passages in the Slavic translation of Malalas' chronicle, regarding the appearance and character of Leontius (*For Leontius was beautiful, of curly hair, young, just, of fair complexion, boasting a handsome nose and handsome eyes*¹⁶). Naturally these are just clues that cannot completely clarify the subject of Leontius' social origin, however they indicate

¹¹ The idea that both sources are credible and can be accommodated regarding the origin of Leontius cannot be unequivocally rejected. There is a possibility that his family came from Syria and moved to Isauria. However, this is just a speculation unsupported by the sources.

¹² John of Antioch, 237.2.

¹³ Theophanes, AM 5972, p. 128.

¹⁴ *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, rev. J. Thurn, Berolini et Novi Eboraci 2000, XV, 13 (although, it does not mention the name of the father); hereafter: John Malalas. No other source mentions Paulina as Leontius' mother, however, in general this information is considered reliable. The epigraphic material from the 5th century Isauria provides us with the name Paulina, who was the wife of Zeno the Elder. However, the attempts at linking her, and by extension Zeno as well, with Leontius seem to be too much of a stretch. See Ch. Begass, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

¹⁵ M. Salamon, *Pamprepiusz z Panopolis – pisarz, profesor, polityk, obrońca pogaństwa w Cesarstwie Wschodnim*, [in:] *Studia classica et byzantina. Alexandro Krawczuk oblata*, ed. M. Salamon, Z.J. Kaperka, Kraków 1996, p. 185.

¹⁶ Theophanes, AM 5972, p. 128; John Malalas (slav.), p. 341: Бѣ же Левнѣтїи красенъ коркоравѣ власатъ оунъ чѣтъ бѣль добръ носомъ добрыма вчима чтивъ. Likely this description was included in the today unknown version of John Malalas' Chronographia, which was at the Slavic translator's disposal. If it was so, then the description of Leontius – just as the other portraits appearing in Malalas' work – was created on the basis of the ancient science of physiognomy,

what the possibilities are.

It seems that the family of Leontius was Christian and he was brought up in the spirit of this religion. Admittedly, there is no information in the sources that would directly prove that view, however, we know that he was a Christian in his adult life¹⁷.

On the subject of Leontius' career up until his imperial proclamation we know that it was military in character, and his crowning achievement was being granted the office of *magister militum per Thracias*¹⁸. We do not know when he received it. It seems that generally the late 70s and early 80s are to be considered. One *magister militum per Thracias* is known from before that period – a certain Heraclius who served in this office in 474 and was killed by the Goths¹⁹. The sources also mention another *magister militum per Thracias* in 478, however, without mentioning the name, yet this person certainly cannot be equated with Leontius²⁰. Because of that, Leontius could be selected for this office by emperor Zeno in 478 at the earliest. It is not obvious whether he was still in office in 484, as it is often assumed²¹. Theophanes, who is the sole source on Leontius' service as the high commander of Thrace includes all that he knew, or considered important, practically in one sentence. The only conclusion from this sentence is that at some point in his life Leontius was in fact the *magister*

according to which the appearance of the man mirrored his character. On this subject, see: M. Kokoszko, *Descriptions of Personal Appearance in John Malalas' Chronicle*, Łódź 1998.

¹⁷ Leontius' Christianity is best evidenced by the opinion on his piety that was exclaimed by the empress Verina, who called him εὐσεβέστατος – most pious John Malalas, XV, 13; Theophanes, AM 5974, p. 129. Aside from the fact that this was a piece of propaganda which was aimed against emperor Zeno, it is undisputable that Leontius was a Christian. Cf. also *The Chronicle of John, bishop of Nikiu*, 88, 81, transl. R.H. Charles, Oxford 1916, p. 119 (*Christian Godloving man*); see also John of Antioch, 237.6.

¹⁸ Theophanes, AM 5972, p. 128. The reservations of E.W. Brooks (*op. cit.*, p. 226), regarding whether Leontius served in that office are not well reasoned. The author claims that Theophanes made a mistake, since information of it is lacking in the primary source, in his view, for the said subject – the *Chronographia* of John Malalas. We cannot be certain of – on that see note 11.

¹⁹ *PLRE* II, p. 542 (s.v. *Heraclius 4*). It is notable that we know, with no significant gaps, the *magistri militum per Thracias* since 464.

²⁰ Malchus, *Testimonia*, 15–16, [in:] *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire. Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*, ed. R.C. Blockley, vol. II, Liverpool 1983. Cf. *PLRE* II, p. 1223 (s.v. *Anonymus 21*).

²¹ *PLRE* II, p. 670; cf. notes of Maciej Salamon – *Pamprepiusz...*, p. 183, n. 95.

militum per Thracias. It should be noted that the information on Leontius in Theophanes does not appear in the context of the events of 484, but rather that of Illus leaving Constantinople, which is dated to 481/482. We do not know who the direct successor of Leontius in the office was. The next *magister militum per Thracias* that is evidenced by the sources is a certain Julian, from the early reign of Anastasius²².

Returning to the subject of Leontius' career, it should be noted that he was awarded with the title of *patricius*²³, likely for his military achievements, about which, however, we know nothing concrete. Possibly, if we consider the passage in Theodor Lector as credible, also a (honorary) consul²⁴. Also in this instance we do not know when this happened. If we connected the above with him serving as the master of arms in Thrace then it must have been during the reign of Zeno.

Finally, I shall bring to some attention the supposed relationship between Leontius and Illus, before the former was dragged into the conflict between the latter and emperor Zeno²⁵. It caused a dramatic turn of events in Leontius' seemingly well developing career. It appears Leontius and Illus must have known each other earlier. There is, admittedly, no mention of that in the sources, however, it would be unlikely for a *magister officiorum*, at a time a person next only to the emperor, and a *magister militum* and *patricius* would not have

²² *PLRE* II, p. 639 (s.v. *Julianus 15*). Julian is known only from the passage in the *Chronicle* of Marcellinus Comes (*The Chronicle of Marcellinus*. a. 493, A Translation and Commentary (with a reproduction of Mommsen' edition of the text) B. Croke, Sydney 1995. The author mentions his death in combat with the Scythians. Likely, under this ethnonym he meant Bulgars. The passage leads to believe that Julian served in the office for some time. However, it cannot be proven that he was a direct successor of Leontius.

²³ John Malalas, XV, 13; John Malalas (slav.), p. 341; Theophanes, AM 5972, 5973.

²⁴ Theodoros Anagnostes, *Kirchengeschichte, Epitome*, 437, hrsg. G.C. Hansen, Berlin 1995. No other source mentions that. The name of Leontius does not appear on the consular lists – cf. S.R. Bagnall, A. Cameron, R.S. Schwartz, A. Klaas Worp, *Consuls of the Later Roman Empire*, Atlanta 1987, p. 714.

²⁵ On the relationship between the emperor Zeno and Illus, his associate and kinsman, e.g.: – E.W. Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 216sq; H. Elton, *op. cit.*, p. 398sq; M.J. Leszka, *Kilka uwag na temat losów Illusa Izauryjczyka w latach 479–484*, "Meander" 2007, R. 40, b. 1–2, p. 99sq; R. Kosiński, *op. cit.*, p. 99sq.

an opportunity to meet, and maybe develop some relations²⁶. This would explain Leontius' willingness to support Illus in his rebellion against Zeno and to receive the imperial purple. Leontius and Illus must have had at least basic mutual trust, which would be rather difficult if they had had no prior contact.

To conclude this short article, it should be noted that Leontius was probably born into the family that belonged to provincial aristocracy, which enabled him to get good education. His ethnic origin, despite the common view in the scholarship that he was an Isaurian, it can just as well be assumed that he came from Syria (which is directly indicated by Theophanes). Leontius' service as a *magister militum per Thracias* seems to have occurred in the years 478–482 (and there can be no certainty if he was still in office in 484).

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²⁶ See also: M. Salamon, *Pamprepiusz...*, p. 183, n. 95. I disregard here the origin of Leontius. Even if he came, same as Illus, from Isauria, it would not have to be a basis for good mutual relations. Cf. W.D. Burgess, *Isaurian Factions in the Reign of Zeno the Isaurian*, "Latomus" 1992, vol. 51, p. 874–880.

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