



Marius Telea

## Emperor Justinian I and his Involvement in the Theopaschite Controversy

### Abstract

The Scythian monks played an important role in the Christological controversies of the 6th century. In the capital of the Byzantine Empire, the group of Acoemetæ monks, secretly supported by Rome, reported everything occurring in Constantinople. Their inclination toward Nestorian dyophysitism displeased those seeking a peaceful compromise - either by diminishing the importance of the Fourth Ecumenical Council or by creating a synthesis between Chalcedonian dyophysite theology and that of Saint Cyril of Alexandria, widely admired by Monophysites. In these circumstances, during the first months of the year 519, a group of monks from Scythia Minor arrived in Constantinople, introducing the theological formula: "One of the Holy Trinity



Assoc. Prof. Dr. Marius Telea teaches History and Spirituality of Byzantium at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of "December 1<sup>st</sup> 1918" University of Alba Iulia, Romania

suffered in the flesh." After prolonged debates, their formula triumphed under Emperor Justinian I the Great.

## Keywords

Scythian monks, Scythia Minor, formula, disputes, decrees

## 1 Introduction

Theopaschism (from Greek θεός – “God” and πάσχω – “to suffer, to endure”) is a theological controversy characterized by heresy and schism<sup>1</sup> which appeared in Constantinople under Patriarch Macedonius II (495-511), was triggered by the inclusion of the phrase “Who was crucified for us” in the text of the hymn “Holy God”, also known as the “Trisagion”, which is part of the “Liturgy of the Word” (or “Liturgy of the Catechumens”). This addition was made by the Monophysite Patriarch Peter Fullo (*Gnafeus*) of Antioch (469/470, 475/476, 485-488).

The origin of this hymn is linked to a miracle that took place during the time of Patriarch Proclus of Constantinople (434-446) and Emperor Theodosius II. Following an earthquake that shook Constantinople, the people, led by the patriarch and the emperor, went out into the fields in a procession. During the communal prayer, a child from the crowd was caught up to the third heaven, just as Saint Paul the Apostle had been, and heard angels singing “Holy God”, while the faithful on earth prayed with tears, saying: “Lord, have mercy on us!” When the child returned among the people, he testified about what he had heard, and the gathered

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<sup>1</sup> Ion Bria, *Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă*, Bucharest, Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române Publishing House, 1981, (106-108).

crowd, along with the patriarch and the emperor, sang the hymn as the child had described it. The earthquake then ceased<sup>2</sup>.

Liturgists and philologists also consider that the hymn "Holy God" has a biblical foundation. Some reference texts such as Isaiah 6:3 ("...Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory!"), Psalm 42:2 ("My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?"), and Psalm 51:1 ("Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions")<sup>3</sup>, while some scholars believe that the hymn "Holy God" originates from the angelic hymn in the Book of Revelation 4:8 ("Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come")<sup>4</sup>.

The discovery of this hymn occurred in a significant historical context, specifically amid the turmoil within the Church caused

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<sup>2</sup> Historical testimonies about this miracle can be found in a letter from Patriarch Acacius of Constantinople to the heretic Peter Fullo, in the apocryphal epistles of Pope Felix III (483-492) against the same Peter Fullo and Emperor Zeno, and in the writings of several Church authors, including Saint John of Damascus, the historian Theophanes the Confessor, and Anastasius the Librarian, among others.

<sup>3</sup> Saint Simeon of Thessalonica says: "The early Fathers, taking from the angels this 'Holy, Holy, Holy' (from Isaiah 6:3) and from David, who sings to God in Trinity, saying: 'My soul thirsts for the mighty, living God,' thus well established this thrice-holy hymn. Moreover, 'have mercy on us,' they also took from this David in prayer. Therefore, it says 'Holy' from the angels and 'God' from David. Similarly, 'Holy Mighty': 'Holy' from the angels and 'Mighty' from David; 'Holy Immortal,' 'Holy' from the angels, 'Immortal,' changing David's expression of 'living' to 'immortal'; and 'have mercy on us' again from him..." („Despre Sfintele Rugăciuni", ch. 316, in *Tratat asupra tuturor dogmelor credinței noastre ortodoxe, după principii puse de Domnul nostru Iisus Hristos și urmașii Săi*, vol. II, Suceava, Arhiepiscopiei Sucevei și Rădăuților Publishing House, 2003, (63).

<sup>4</sup> Konstantin Nikolakopoulos, *Imnografia ortodoxă la început și azi*, Bucharest, Basilica Publishing House, 2015, (148).

by the Monophysite heresy, which professed that in the person of the Savior Christ, human nature was absorbed by the divine nature. The Church's victory over this heresy was crowned by the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451), after which the Orthodox condemned Monophysitism and chanted this hymn. Singing the "Holy God" hymn at the end of the council was a living confession of faith in the Persons of the Holy Trinity and their consubstantiality<sup>5</sup> in front of the Monophysites, who had adapted this hymn, erroneously attributing suffering and death on the cross to the divine nature of the Savior Christ.

In this dispute, Bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus (423-457) had already been involved; in 453, he dedicated a chapter, "Epitome", in his compendium "Against Heresies", to combating theopaschism, asserting that the Son of God, mentioned in the "Trisagion", died on the cross. Similarly, Saint Cyril of Alexandria taught that the expression "God suffered in the flesh" aligns with orthodox Christology, as the Son assumed human nature in the condition or mode of existence (Greek: *τρόπος*) in which Adam had left it. The death of the Son of God is a sign of human nature He assumed<sup>6</sup>.

The theopaschite controversy erupted in Constantinople in the early 6th century during Patriarch Macedonius II and the revolt led by General Vitalian, both of whom sought to enforce the

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<sup>5</sup> Saint John of Damascus said about the "Trisagion" following: "We attribute the words' Holy God' to the Father, and by this, we do not assign the name of Divinity to Him alone, for we know that both the Son and the Holy Spirit are God. We attribute the words' Holy Mighty' to the Son but do not deprive the Father and the Holy Spirit of power. Moreover, we attribute the words' Holy Immortal' to the Holy Spirit, without excluding the Father and the Son from immortality; rather, we attribute all divine names simply and absolutely to each of the hypostases." *Dogmatica*, Bucharest, Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române Publishing House, 2001, (132-135).

<sup>6</sup> Ion Bria, *op. cit.*, (108).

Orthodoxy established at Chalcedon. A staunch Chalcedonian, Patriarch Macedonius remained a symbol of the isolation of the Church in the Byzantine capital throughout his tenure. Opposing both the Monophysite Emperor Anastasius I (494-518) and the Monophysite majority in Egypt and Syria, Constantinople found itself abandoned by Rome, which, due to its centralist formalism, did not forgive the fact that it maintained in the diptychs the name of Patriarch Acacius, who had been involved in the “Henotikon” dispute. Relying on the Acoemeti monks (the Sleepless Ones), Macedonius rejected any compromise with Monophysitism, but this opposition remained purely negative and led to criticism. The doctrinal weakness of his position was illustrated by the theopaschite episode, provoked mainly by the interpolation made in the “Trisagion” by the Monophysites<sup>7</sup>.

The modification was introduced into the “Trisagion” by the Monophysite Patriarch of Antioch, Peter Fullo. The original text of this hymn was: “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us”. The Antiochian patriarch added the phrase “Who was crucified for us” (“ὁ σταυροθεὶς δι’ ἡμᾶς”). This addition aimed to proclaim an important aspect of Saint Cyril’s theology: the Word, as the only “subject” in Jesus Christ, is also the subject of death “in the flesh”, which is “His own”.

Undoubtedly, the “Trisagion” was understood as a hymn dedicated to the Incarnate Logos, and its variant with this addition was formally orthodox. It would have been heretical if the hymn had been dedicated to the Holy Trinity, as it would have implied the suffering of all three Persons or the divine nature itself. From Saint Cyril of Alexandria’s Christological conception to Peter Fullo’s views, the theopaschite idea had undergone substantial

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<sup>7</sup> John Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church*, Crestwood, New York, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001, (33-34).

modifications. Theopaschism was no longer a doctrine resulting from the dogma of the communication of properties but rather from the idea of the absorption of Christ's human nature into the divine one to the point of its disappearance. The Monophysite idea ultimately led to the teaching that God suffered through His very divine essence<sup>8</sup>. The Orthodox did not recognize Peter Fullo's addition, opposing it through synodal decisions, writings, and even revolts. Emperor Anastasius I's pro-Monophysite stance facilitated the introduction of the addition in Constantinople, but not without resistance from the faithful people, who were aware that they were confessing Monophysitism by pronouncing it.

However, Theopaschism was an old concept, found even in Saint Ignatius Theophorus (†107), who stated in his *Epistle to the Romans* that Christ suffered in the flesh. All the Holy Fathers affirmed this within the general framework of divine economy. However, when the idea took shape as a separate concept - "One of the Holy Trinity suffered in the flesh" ("ἓνα δῆς ἁγίας τριάδος πεπονθέναι σαρχί" or "Unus de Trinitate carne passus est") - it became controversial.

The Theopaschite concept began to be discussed in contradictory terms during the Christological disputes between the two primary theological schools of the East: Antioch and Alexandria. Antioch rejected the formula "God suffered", while Alexandria gave the phrase an orthodox meaning by specifying that "the Logos suffered". Bishop Proclus of Constantinople, using the expression "One in the Trinity suffered in the flesh", wrote against Theodore of Mopsuestia:

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel Nicolae Vălean, *Erezii, controverse și schisme în creștinismul secolelor I-IX*, Cluj-Napoca, Limes Publishing House, 2009, (162).

„Whoever affirms that the One who was crucified, Christ, is God, implicitly confesses that the Father and the Holy Spirit were also crucified, if the nature of the Trinity is one. As for me, I object to you and ask you: Is the One who was crucified one of the Persons of the Trinity or someone else outside the Trinity? If it is one and the same, the perplexity is resolved. But if it is someone else, outside the Trinity, then the Lord of glory would be the fourth and foreign to the glory of the seraphim. But if we were to say that He was crucified in the Godhead, we would introduce passion into the Trinity. But if we say that the Logos suffered in His flesh, we confess that the One who suffered is one of the Persons of the Trinity, for the nature of the Trinity remained impassible. He who became incarnate was crucified. But if He who became incarnate was crucified, it follows that the Father and the Holy Spirit were not crucified; therefore, only one of the Persons of the Trinity was crucified”<sup>9</sup>.

This confession could be interpreted not only in a Monophysite sense but also in an Orthodox sense. It expressed the communication of attributes of the two natures of Jesus Christ due to their union in His single Person. Thus, the second Person of the Holy Trinity suffered not in His divine nature but in the flesh - that is, in the human nature united with the divine nature of Christ. In this way, the union of the two natures in Christ was highlighted<sup>10</sup>. The Monophysites believed this union had been diminished by the dogmatic formula of the Council of Chalcedon: “in two natures”.

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<sup>9</sup> *De fide*, III, quoted by Ioan Maxeșțiu, *Libellus fidei*, apud. Nicolae Chifăr, *Istoria creștinismului*, vol. II, Iași, Trinitas Publishing House, 2000, (177-178).

<sup>10</sup> Asterios Gerostergios, *Iustinian cel Mare. Sfânt și împărat*, translation from English by Ovidiu Ioan, Bucharest, Sophia Publishing House, 2004, (147).

The Theopaschites proposed a reconciliation based on the Christological position of Chalcedon, with the Theopaschite formula reinterpreted through the original lens of early Cyrillian theology, primarily as expressed in the "Twelve Anathemas". Understood in these terms, Chalcedon could become acceptable even to the Monophysites. An integral part of the Theopaschite solution to reconcile the East with the West (the Acacian Schism) was the requirement that Rome accept the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (381) as having equal status with Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, which would have obliged the papacy to recognize Constantinople's primatial status in the East - a recognition Rome stubbornly refused<sup>11</sup>. This important aspect of the Theopaschite dispute - the place of Rome's ecclesiastical authority within the Christian Empire - will be discussed in the light of the "Henotikon.", the one who had ultimately caused that crisis. The dispute based on the Theopaschite formula has been discussed during the reign of Emperor Justinian I (527-565) by the delegation of Scythian monks who arrived in Constantinople to defend their cause.

## **2 The Scythian Monks and the Theopaschite Formula Presented in Constantinople and Rome**

The Theopaschite controversy is associated with the Scythian monks, who played a significant role in the Christological disputes that continued into the 6th century during the reigns of Emperor Anastasius I, Emperors Justin I (518-527) and Justinian I (527-565).

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<sup>11</sup> Teodor Baconsky, „Un document patristic străromân: «Epistola către africani a călugărilor sciți»”, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, CVI, 1988, No. 3-4 (March-April), (110).



Doctrinal issues stirred unrest, particularly within monastic circles. Origen, Nestorius, and various shades of Monophysitism had sympathizers among those who wore monastic garb. In Constantinople, the Nestorians were supported by the Acoemetae monks ("the sleepless ones"), who enjoyed covert backing from Rome and reported all happenings in the Byzantine capital. Their stance displeased those striving to achieve ecclesiastical peace. This was the atmosphere in the Byzantine capital at the beginning of 519 when monks originating from Scythia Minor arrived there:

*"Who likely practiced their monastic obedience (metania) in a monastery (coenobium) in Scythia Minor, on a site significantly named later 'The Monastery,' a location archaeologically identified within the triangle formed by Niculițel-Cocoș, Celic-Dere, and Saon, maintaining the monastic character known today. They had developed a formula articulated in the spirit of Orthodoxy: 'One of the Trinity suffered in the flesh.' They travelled to present and advocate their stance before Emperor Justin I, before the general Vitalian, their compatriot and relative to one of them, and before Pope Hormisdas..."*

The Scythians aimed to establish a position of reconciliation between Eastern Orthodox believers and Monophysites, while also seeking reconciliation with the Roman See occupied by Pope Hormisdas (514-523), who held a strongly dyophysite interpretation of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy. They hoped to achieve this based on a categorically Cyrillian reinterpretation of the Chalcedonian decisions. This goal is reflected in their acute insistence upon the "Twelve Anathemas". The most vehement of these

anathemas, the twelfth, provided the monks with their distinctive formula: “Unus de Trinitate carne passus est” (“One of the Trinity suffered in the flesh”).<sup>12</sup>

The group of Scythian monks who arrived in Constantinople was quite numerous, and the zeal with which they tried to impose their proposed formula was commendable. From the letters they sent or received, we can identify the names of some of these monks: John Maxentius, Leontius, Peter the Deacon, Mauritius, John, and Achilles<sup>13</sup>.

John Maxentius appears to have been an educated monk, familiar with the theological issues of his time, as demonstrated by his surviving writings: “Chapters Against Nestorians and Pelagians”, “Dialogue Against Nestorians” and “A Very Brief Confession of Orthodox Faith”. In these works, he presented arguments supporting the Theopaschite formula while simultaneously affirming his loyalty to the decisions of Chalcedon<sup>14</sup>.

Leontius, the second known Scythian monk, was related to General Vitalian, a man of considerable influence at the imperial Court. There is ongoing debate regarding this monk. According to some scholars, he might be identical to Leontius of Byzantium, the theologian of Justinian I, influenced by Aristotelian philosophy, from whom numerous theological treatises survive, such as “Against the Monophysites”, “Against Severus of Antioch” and “Against the Nestorians”<sup>15</sup>. However, recent research does not confirm the identity between these two figures.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, (112).

<sup>13</sup> Alexandru M. Ioniță, „Viața mănăstirească în Dobrogea până în secolul al XII-lea”, in *Studii Teologice*, II-nd Series, XXIX, No. 1-2 (January-February), (86).

<sup>14</sup> Nestor Vornicescu, *Primele scrieri patristice în literatura noastră, secolele IV-XVI*, Craiova, Mitropoliei Olteniei Publishing House, 1984, (75).

<sup>15</sup> Vasile Gh. Sibiescu, *Călugării sciți*, Sibiu, Diecezană Printing House, 1936, (2-3).

No historically significant details regarding the other Scythian monks mentioned above have been found. The papal legates in Constantinople stated that Achilles was very malicious.

The origin of these monks has not been disputed, as all agree they came from our ancient province, where numerous Christians lived. The bishops of Tomis, historically known as the Church of Scythia Minor, maintained frequent relations with other Churches within the Byzantine Empire and even with the Church of Rome. Supporting the assertion that these monks originated from Scythia Minor is the information provided by Roman legates to Pope Hormisdas: one of the Scythian monks, Leontius, was related to General Vitalian, himself of Scythian origin. Vitalian hosted them in his home and supported them with all the influence he enjoyed in the imperial capital, indicating they were fellow countrymen<sup>16</sup>.

The determination of the Scythian monks to promote their formula was supported by their conviction that they were defending Chalcedon by appealing to the Christology of Saint Cyril. The Scythian monks aimed to eliminate through their formula - closely related to Saint Cyril's phrase "one incarnate nature of God the Logos" - any Nestorian interpretation that would reduce the hypostatic union defined at the Fourth Ecumenical Council to expressions such as "the Son of God and the Son of Mary, united by grace". According to the Scythian monks, Christ is one of the Holy Trinity even with His own body, and He suffered for us in the flesh; yet, according to the flesh, He is not from the essence of the Trinity but identical with us. Although the body of Christ belongs to the Trinity, according to the flesh, He is not from the essence of the Trinity. Therefore, they insisted on accepting the

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, (4).

formula "God suffered in the flesh" because it is identical to the statement "Christ suffered in the flesh". Divinity itself is impassible, yet one can confess that God suffered in the flesh because Jesus Christ is confessed as the true God<sup>17</sup>.

While the Scythian monks were trying to win Constantinople over to their formula, a delegation from Rome arrived, aiming to end the Acacian schism, which had lasted 35 years since 484. The Acoemetæ monks informed the papal legates, led by Deacon Dioscorus, about everything happening in the capital related to the Scythians' formula, which, in their opinion, risked reviving Monophysitism. The legates quickly became hostile toward the Scythian monks, seeing them as obstacles to church unity. According to Dioscorus's reports, a fierce debate erupted between the Scythians and a deacon named Victor, who accused them of Monophysitism. Victor upheld the teachings in Pope Leo's letter to Patriarch Flavian of Constantinople (449) and the Synodal letter of Saint Cyril of Alexandria. However, the Scythian monks wished to add to these the formula "Unus de Sancta Trinitate passus est carne" ("One of the Holy Trinity suffered in the flesh"). Since Victor rejected this addition, the Scythians considered him a pure Nestorian<sup>18</sup>. It was natural, however, that the Scythians' formula, like any new formulation, would cause hesitation and turmoil in Constantinople, especially since it could be suspected of Monophysitism. The Scythian monks cannot be blamed for this tension, as the atmosphere in Constantinople was already troubled before their arrival. Their difficulties demonstrate that they did not use Vitalian's power and influence to impose their

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<sup>17</sup> Nicolae Chifăr, *op. cit.*, (179). Also see Ioan G. Coman, *Și Cuvântul trup S-a făcut. Hristologie și mariologie patristică*, Timișoara, Mitropoliei Banatului Publishing House, 1993, p. 172.

<sup>18</sup> E. Amman, „Hormisdas (Saint)”, in *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique*, t. VII/1 (Hobbes-Infidèles), Paris, Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1922, (172).

formula. Instead, the Scythian monks sought to advocate for their position through persuasion. They encountered resistance, particularly from those who believed that nothing could be added to the decisions of Chalcedon and Pope Leo I's Epistle.

The Scythians addressed the legates from Rome in writing through a letter composed by John Maxentius. This letter is a careful demonstration based on patristic arguments. According to John Maxentius, the Scythian formula did not challenge or alter the Chalcedonian decisions but instead defended these decisions by appealing to statements made by the Church Fathers<sup>19</sup>. The papal legates did not approve the Scythian monks' formula, leading the monks to argue as follows: If the papal Church recognized that Christ the God-Logos is one person of the Holy Trinity, why then refuse to acknowledge that Christ is "One of the Trinity"? If God the Logos is Christ and Christ is God-Logos, why is Christ not "One of the Trinity"? This raised a logical question: If a person of the Trinity is indeed Christ, and Christ is truly God-Logos, then why should it be difficult to accept that Christ is "One of the Trinity", since the divine person (hypostasis) is identical with Christ from within the Trinity?<sup>20</sup>

The Scythian monks' Christology in support of Theopaschism is clearly expressed in their writings: According to their *Letter*, addressed to the papal legates, the God-Logos bestowed ineffable glory upon the assumed human nature through incarnation. However, discussions with the papal legates yielded no results. The Theopaschite dispute highlighted certain philosophical tendencies within Neo-Chalcedonianism, which aimed, on the one hand, to eliminate Nestorian interpretations and, on the

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<sup>19</sup> Vasile Gh. Sibiescu, *op. cit.*, (9).

<sup>20</sup> Nicolae Chifăr, *op. cit.*, (179).

other, to reinforce Chalcedonian teaching on the hypostatic union of two natures as “without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation”. The Scythian monks’ formula could thus have been approved as consistent with Chalcedonian Christology, which defined precisely such a union of two distinct yet inseparable natures in Christ<sup>21</sup>.

Although it was orthodox, the Theopashite formula was rejected by both the bishop of Tomis, Paternus, and by Pope Hormisdas and the papal legates in Constantinople.

Seeing they could not reach a positive outcome with the papal legates, who were denouncing them everywhere - and especially to Pope Hormisdas - as heretics, the Scythian monks decided to travel to Rome to defend themselves and advocate their formula. At Rome, they waited in vain for a favourable decision from Pope Hormisdas, who delayed his response due to pressure from his legates, who had warned him that nothing could be added to the decisions of the early Ecumenical Councils. The Pope was also cautious because openly supporting the Scythians might antagonize relations further, even though Emperor Justin I and General Vitalian in Constantinople favoured the Scythians’ position.

Even though the monks received no response from the Pope, they were also prevented from leaving Rome. John Maxentius reported that they were unjustly mistreated despite their innocence. Unable to decide yet forbidden from leaving, their situation became increasingly difficult. The Scythian monks eventually appealed to the Roman senators. One senator, Faustus, inquired about them through a presbyter named Trifolius, who

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, (180).

claimed that the Scythians' formula revealed its alleged Arian origins and suited all kinds of heresies<sup>22</sup>. The letter of Trifolius indicates that while the Scythian monks found little sympathy among the clergy, who accused them of heresy, their reception among the Roman senators and laypeople was more favourable. In a letter dated July 519, Justinian I, who at the time was co-emperor, requested Pope Hormisdas to allow the Scythian monks to leave Rome. Although initially Justinian I appeared to pay little attention to the issue raised by the Scythian monks, he eventually became their supporter. The Scythians' formula became his own; later, he enforced it through his edicts. Thus, in Justinian I, the Scythian monks gained a defender and a promoter of their theological formula<sup>23</sup>.

The return to Rome of Dioscorus, an open enemy of the Scythian monks and their formula, radically changed their situation. Dioscorus convinced Pope Hormisdas to expel the Scythian monks from Rome, an act that indeed took place, causing discontent among the local population, who sympathized with them. Thus, after facing numerous dangers, enduring a long and challenging journey, and suffering many hardships, the Scythian monks were expelled from Rome and returned to Constantinople without achieving any result.

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<sup>22</sup> *Trifoli presbyteri epistola ad beatum Faustum senatorem contra Iohanem Scytum monahum*, in Migne PL, t. 63, (533-558).

<sup>23</sup> Alexandru M. Ioniță, art. cit, (85).

### 3 The Scythian Monks' Connections with Africa

While being ignored and delayed by the Pope in Rome, the Scythian monks contacted representatives of the African Church, hoping to win their support for their formula. Two letters addressed to the Africans have been preserved.

Among the recipients were the learned Bishop Fulgentius of Ruspe (468-533) and Deacon Fulgentius Ferrandus († 546/547), exiled to Sardinia by Thrasamund, king of the Vandals. Their proximity to Italy facilitated communication with the Scythian monks. The monks informed these exiles that they considered it necessary to share their beliefs regarding the Incarnation of the Lord. They also emphasized that the Africans did not differ in any point of faith and expressed their joy should the Africans affirm the Orthodox teachings. The monks asked them to examine the doctrinal statement sent to them so that, united in the faith of the Holy Fathers, they might together give thanks to the Lord<sup>24</sup>.

Then follows the issue of the Scythian formula, grounded in patristic teachings, specifically the "Twelfth Anathema" of Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the "Third Anathema" of the same Holy Father, which refers to the division of substances after the union of the divine and human natures in the person of our Savior, Christ.

The Scythian monks' letter<sup>25</sup> included the following points of theological interest:

a) Considerable space was dedicated to patristic quotations drawn from the works of Saints Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Athanasius the Great.

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<sup>24</sup> Nestor Vornicescu, *op. cit.*, (76).

<sup>25</sup> *Dominis Sanctissimis et cum omni veneratione nominandis, Datiano, Fortunato, Albano, Orontio, Boethia, Fulgentio, Januario et caeteris episcopis set in Christi confessione decoratis exigui Petrus diaconus, Joannes et caeteri fratres in causa fidei Romam directi*, Migne PL t. 62, (83-92).



b) In their Christological doctrine, the monks emphasized the two natures of the Savior Christ, necessarily implying the unity of His incarnate Person<sup>26</sup>.

c) The Theopaschite formula does not explicitly appear in the text in its classical form, but its foundation - the "Twelfth Anathema" - is explicitly quoted. The validity of the "Twelve Anathemas" is firmly supported<sup>27</sup>.

Composed according to all conventions, this letter gained the Africans' adherence to the Scythian formula. Bishop Fulgentius of Ruspe responded by emphasizing that Christ, as God, is One of the Holy Trinity, to whom, through the incarnation, the human element - which suffered - was added<sup>28</sup>. This did not mean applying suffering to the Holy Trinity, as the accusations against the Scythian formula claimed. Deacon Fulgentius Ferrandus defended the Scythian monks' formula, as did Facundus of Hermiane, defender of the "Three Chapters", who considered it orthodox and saw it as supporting the maternity of the Holy Virgin.

Although the Africans supported the Scythian formula, one individual openly expressed disapproval - a certain Possessor. He suspected the Scythian formula of Monophysitism. In Constantinople, Possessor engaged in heated debates with the Scythians, opposing them with arguments drawn from the letters of Faustus of Riez, a semi-Pelagian and enemy of the Scythians. John Maxentius declared Possessor's letters heretical because, though he claimed to rely on Hilary of Poitiers, Prosper of Aquitaine, and Blessed Augustine, he wrote something entirely different from these Fathers and refused to confess clearly that Jesus Christ, the

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<sup>26</sup> F. L Cross, *Dictionary of Christian Church*, Oxford, 1974, (362).

<sup>27</sup> Teodor Baconsky, art. cit., (114).

<sup>28</sup> Nestor Vornicescu, *op. cit.*, (76-77).

Son of the Living God, crucified in the flesh for the salvation of the world, is One of the Holy Trinity<sup>29</sup>.

In his letter to Pope Hormisdas, Possessor, hostile to John Maxentius and his companions, presented a distorted view of events in Constantinople. His misrepresentation made him an open enemy of the Scythian monks, who continually accused him of heresy.

#### **4 Emperor Justinian I and the Theopaschite Formula**

With the end of the Acacian Schism in 519, an atmosphere favourable to achieving the unity of all Christians in the Orthodox faith was created - one of the goals of Justinian I, who was only a co-ruler alongside his uncle, Justin I. Pope Hormisdas sent letters to Emperor Justin I, Patriarch John of Constantinople, Justinian, and others, urging them to seek ecclesiastical communion with the Sees of Antioch and Alexandria, actions he consistently pursued.

Aware of the divisions that had arisen among the Monophysites, Justinian initially focused his attention on the group led by Severus of Antioch, composed of moderate Monophysites known as the “δακρίνομενοι” (diakrinomenoi). A dogmatic formula that could be common ground between Orthodox believers and moderate Monophysites was sought. A potential solution appeared to be the one proposed by the Scythian monks, who argued that unity could be achieved by commonly accepting the confession: “One of the Holy Trinity suffered in the flesh”. This formula could be explained not only in a Monophysite sense but also in an Orthodox manner. It expressed the communication of the attrib-

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<sup>29</sup> Vasile Gh. Sibiescu, *op. cit.*, (17).

utes of Christ's two natures due to their union in His single Person. This meant that the second Person of the Holy Trinity suffered not in His divine nature but in the flesh, that is, in His human nature united with the divine<sup>30</sup>.

Thus, the Theopaschite formula attracted Justinian's attention, increasing his hope that a long-desired common ground between Orthodox believers and Monophysites had finally been found. Unfortunately, this was not to be, as the theological divisions persisted. Nonetheless, Justinian affirmed that "One of the Holy Trinity, who reigns together with the Father and the Spirit, suffered in the flesh", as Saint John the Evangelist indicated. Therefore, Justinian stated clearly: "We shall not doubt that His Person is the One who suffered in the flesh", as shown by Saint John the Evangelist. Consequently, Justinian insisted: "We will not doubt that His Person is in the flesh", clearly emphasizing the orthodox character of the Scythian monks' formulation<sup>31</sup>. The emperor wrote several times to the Pope, expressing his views on the much-debated formula and requesting his opinion. In one of these letters, Justinian explicitly states:

*"... He whom the greatest of the Apostles preached as having suffered in the flesh is rightly called One of the Holy Trinity, who reigns together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it seems doubtful to say merely 'One' of the Holy Trinity alongside the Father and the Holy Spirit, since without the Person of Christ the Trinity cannot be fully understood or faithfully worshipped. As Blessed Augustine also said: 'Which one of the Persons of the Holy Trinity,' and elsewhere, 'He alone of the Holy*

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<sup>30</sup> Asterios Gerostergios, *op. cit.*, (147).

<sup>31</sup> Justinian, *Epistolae*, in "Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum", Vol. 35, Wien, Collectio Avellana, F. Tempski, 1895, (61-62).

*Trinity assumed flesh,' and again, 'He alone among the Three.'*"<sup>32</sup>.

However, it should be noted that, although orthodox, the Scythian monks' formula was initially rejected by Bishop Paternus of Tomis, Pope Hormisdas, and even Justinian himself. In a letter addressed to Pope Hormisdas on June 29, 519, Justinian wrote that he had heard of certain monks who intended to cause trouble and had gone to Rome. Their formula, he argued, could not be accepted because it was not found in the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils nor the "Confession of Faith" by Pope Leo I. Therefore, at first, Justinian sided with the Roman legates, who protested against the Theopaschite formula in Constantinople. However, shortly thereafter, Justinian changed his stance toward the Scythian monks, viewing their formula as a potential bridge between Monophysites and Orthodox believers, given its closeness to Saint Cyril of Alexandria's expression, "one incarnate nature of God the Logos", which the Monophysites refused to abandon<sup>33</sup>.

In July 519, Justinian wrote to Pope Hormisdas to support the Scythian monks, mentioning them favourably. Vitalian likely played a significant role in this, influencing Justinian to change his attitude toward the Scythian monks. Indeed, in the above-mentioned letter, Justinian intervened directly, requesting Pope Hormisdas to allow the monks to leave Rome, thereby advocating justice for his newfound allies<sup>34</sup>.

Since Justinian received no reply, he wrote again to Pope Hormisdas, asking for clarification regarding the statement that

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<sup>32</sup> Augustin Knecht, *Die Religios-Politik kaiser Justinian I*, Würzburg, A. Gobel, 1896, (81-82), apud. Asterios Gerostergios *op. cit.*, (148).

<sup>33</sup> Vasile Gh. Sibiescu, *Împăratul Iustinian I și ereziile*, Bucharest, „Carpați” Printing House, 1938, (69).

<sup>34</sup> Idem, *Călugării sciți*, (19).

Jesus Christ, who suffered in the flesh for the salvation of humanity, is "One of the Holy Trinity."

On July 9, 520, Justinian again wrote to the Pope about the Scythian formula, which he had now adopted himself, affirming clearly that Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, is "One of the Holy Trinity, who suffered in the flesh". In this letter, Justinian explicitly confessed that Christ is indeed "One of the Trinity" ("Unus de Sancta Trinitate"), stating firmly his position<sup>35</sup>. Thus, Justinian approved the Scythian formula despite its rejection by the Pope and his legates, who considered it heretical. Justinian hoped to attract moderate Monophysites to the true faith through this formula.

Between 521 and 527, there is no further information about the Scythian monks and their Christological formula. This lack can be explained by the fact that their issue became exclusively Eastern. After Pope Hormisdas's reply in March 521 rejected the Scythian formula because nothing could be added to what had already been established by the Ecumenical Councils, Western Christians lost interest in the matter.

Justinian ascended the imperial throne in 527. In his edict from that year, which served as a proclamation to his people, Justinian mentioned the teachings of the Scythian monks, though in a somewhat vaguer form. Their doctrine became mandatory for all Christians within the Empire, as it had been confirmed by the emperor and aligned with the entire Trinitarian and Christological doctrine of Christianity. The edict carefully emphasized that the Holy Trinity remained unchanged, even though "One of the Trinity" had suffered in the flesh, yet not in His divine essence<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Idem, *Împăratul Iustinian I și ereziile*, (68).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, (68-69).

At the theological conference of 532-533, during which Justinian sought the unification of Orthodox Christians with moderate Monophysites, reference was made to the formula proposed by the Dobrogean monks. While the Theopaschite formula had not been precisely expressed in Justinian's edict of 527, on March 15, 533, he declared it obligatory for all who professed the Orthodox formula. In this edict, the Scythian monks' formula was fully aligned with the broader Trinitarian and Christological teaching: the Holy Trinity remains the Holy Trinity, even though One of the Trinity became incarnate and suffered in the flesh, but not in His divine essence.

Meanwhile, the Acoemetæ monks, long-standing adversaries of the Scythians, sent delegates to Rome to inform Pope John II, the successor of Hormisdas, about ongoing theological issues in the Eastern Orthodox Church. In response, Justinian dispatched his delegation, composed of Hypatius of Ephesus and Demetrius of Philippi, to counter the actions of the Acoemetæ monks. The imperial delegation urged Pope John II to recognize the teaching that "One of the Holy Trinity suffered in the flesh", which Justinian considered an essential defence against Nestorianism.

The imperial delegation successfully persuaded Pope John II to accept the Scythian monks' Christological teaching and formula, and the pope proceeded to excommunicate the Acoemetæ monks, accusing them of Nestorianism. His successor, Pope Agapetus I (535-536), also recognized this formula, explicitly informing the emperor that he did so not due to acceptance of secular authority in doctrinal matters but because the doctrine supported by Justinian aligned with that of the Holy Fathers, thereby preserving Christian unity<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Nicolae Chifăr, *op. cit.*, (181).

Thus, Emperor Justinian successfully imposed the Theopaschite formula - initially opposed by Pope Hormisdas - upon subsequent popes themselves, a fact acknowledged even by the Roman bishops. Justinian's commitment and determination were recognized and appreciated by Popes as well.

Ultimately, the Scythian monks' formula was officially adopted at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553, and those who rejected it were deemed Nestorians<sup>38</sup>.

The Trullan Synod of 692 condemned the Theopaschite formula. However, this condemnation did not affect the Scythian monks' formula itself, but rather the addition made by Peter the Fuller, who claimed that God suffered solely according to His divinity. Peter Fullon's interpretation suggested that suffering affected the divine nature, whereas the Scythian formula maintained that suffering occurred exclusively in Christ's human nature, not affecting the divine essence.

This was precisely the meaning of the Scythian formula - a meaning Pope Hormisdas did not accept, arguing that nothing further could be added to the Christological decisions already established at the Council of Chalcedon<sup>39</sup>.

## **Conclusions**

The Scythian monks influenced Emperor Justinian I's religious policy by proposing the Theopaschite formula. This formula sought to reconcile moderate Monophysites with Orthodox Christianity by interpreting the Christology of the Council of

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<sup>38</sup> Iustinian, *Tratatul dogmatic contra călugărilor monofiziți din Egipt*, in Migne PG, t. 85, (1114B), apud. *Ibidem*, (182).

<sup>39</sup> Vasile Gh. Sibiescu, *Călugării sciți*, (23).

Chalcedon in line with the teachings of Saint Cyril of Alexandria. This approach became foundational to Justinian's religious policy and represented a significant honour for these monks from Scythia Minor, who played an influential theological role during that period.

The monks' origin in Scythia Minor facilitated their travels and participation in theological debates within the Byzantine Empire. Given their extended stay in Constantinople, they participated actively in theological discussions at the imperial court.

It must be emphasized that the theological formula proposed by the Scythian monks was highly regarded. It was intensely debated in church circles and recognized by prominent theologians as orthodox. Eventually, Emperor Justinian himself officially accepted it and enforced it through imperial authority.

In conclusion, Emperor Justinian I maintained significant connections with territories such as Scythia Minor. A possible means of unifying the Orthodox and moderate Monophysites was interpreting the Council of Chalcedon in the Cyrillian tradition, emphasizing the union of the two natures in the Person of Christ. Thus, by adopting the Scythian monks' formula, Justinian believed he could maintain the theological integrity of Chalcedonian decisions while remaining faithful to Cyril of Alexandria's teaching on Christ's hypostatic union.

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