

The Barbarians in the Letters of Synesius

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البربر في رسائل سينييسيوس

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قسم التاريخ ، كلية الآداب ، جامعة عمر المختار ، البيضاء ، ليبيا.

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المخلص:

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية وضع البربر في أواخر القرن الرابع وأوائل الخامس الميلادي. من خلال رسائل سينييسيوس القوريني (حوالي 373-413 م)، الفيلسوف الذي أصبح لاحقاً أسقفاً على مدينة طلميثة والذي كتب أكثر من 150 رسالة. في رسائله، لا يُميز سينييسيوس بين الليبيين المقيمين جنوب حدود الإقليم والمقيمين داخل حدوده؛ تُقدّم هذه الورقة صورة على كيفية نظرة سينييسيوس إلى البربر في شرق ليبيا، تبحث الورقة أيضاً في الدور المحوري الذي لعبه سينييسيوس ومجموعات الدفاع المحلية في مقاومة هذه الهجمات، كما تحلل طبيعة التعاون العسكري خلال تلك الفترة.

الكلمات الدالة: سينييسيوس القوريني، البربر، غارات البربر، الدفاعات العسكرية البيزنطية، المدن الخمس.

Abstract

This paper investigates the situation of Barbarians during the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th Centuries. Drawing on the letters of Synesius of Cyrene (c. 373–413 AD), a philosopher and later bishop of Ptolemais who wrote more than 150 letters. In his letters Synesius does not distinguish between Barbarians residing south of the provincial frontier (portray) and those dwelling within its boundaries. This paper provides insight into how Synesius may have perceived the native Libyan population, particularly in eastern Libya. The paper also examines the crucial role played by Synesius and local defense groups in resisting these attacks and analyses the nature of military cooperation during this period.

Keywords: Synesius of Cyrene, The Barbarians, The Barbarians Incursions, The Military Co-operation, Pentapolis.

1- Introduction

By the end of the 4th Century A.D. Cyrene, once a prosperous land, had fallen into steep decline. Heavy taxation, corrupt governors, and repeated natural disasters, such as earthquakes, plagues of

locusts, pestilence, war, fire, and famine, weakened the region. Lawlessness spread, and violent men terrorized ordinary citizens. Yet the most destructive threat came from the constant raids of nomadic tribes from the south. In his letters, Synesius of Cyrene describes these raiders not as soldiers but as mere brigands “called an enemy” who preyed upon the weak but fled when met with resistance. One group, the Macetae, and launched a major invasion. They swept through the countryside, killing those who could not escape to fortified towns, burning crops, seizing livestock, and carrying women into slavery. In earlier raids they had spared young boys, and killed all males, fearing they lacked the numbers to both guard captives and continue plundering. Synesius’ writings highlight the widening cultural gap between the Byzantines and the Barbarians. He explicitly demanded the exclusion of Berbers probably the urbanized groups living in the cities from both the provincial government and the imperial army. This was not an idiosyncratic prejudice, but an attitude deeply rooted in the Roman cultural environment of the time. In other words, the Greeks constructed a conceptual boundary of “us” versus “them,” a distinction that not only separated the Greco-Roman from all others but also served to delineate and affirm their identity. For Synesius and his contemporaries, the Barbarians were not neighbors to be integrated, but a hostile people to be feared, excluded, and resisted.

1.1 Literature Review

A few papers have been published on Barbarians in the letters of Synesius, but none has attempted to establish a connection with the Libyan community. Rather, scholarly focus is on their attacks. For example, Marshall has analysed Synesius’ letters and demonstrated clearly how Synesius suffered from the Barbarians but seems to fail to distinguish in his analysis between the Barbarians of the south and eastern Libya (Marshall, 2000). He argues that although Synesius implicitly distinguishes between Libyans residing south of the frontier and those within the province, he does not necessarily depict the former as barbaric and the latter as civilized. His aim is to demonstrate that Synesius’ construction of the Libyans is flexible, insofar as they are simultaneously represented as the Cyrenaican “other” and incorporated into the Cyrenaican “self.” Unlike, Marshall this paper refers to Synesius’ speech, when he met the Emperor Arcadius (378-408 A.D) in Constantinople. In 390 A.D, at the court of Emperor Arcadius in Constantinople, a petition was submitted requesting a reduction of taxes for the province, a concession that was ultimately granted by Aurelian in 402 A.D. (Hervás, 2024). In this speech, he relayed to Arcadius the suffering of the Pentapolis at the hands of the Berbers, Synesius referred, rather to the Berber civilization as a whole and he made clear his hatred of a people that he usually called the “enemy”.

1.2 The Aim of the Study

An important aim of this paper is to offer such an analysis of the situation of Barbarians as shown in Synesius’ Letters. The purpose of this paper is to show the role of Byzantines army in fighting the Barbarians in the light of Synesius’ testimony.

1.3 Research Questions

This paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How was the Barbarians in the sight of Synesius?
2. What was the role of Synesius in fighting the Barbarians?
3. What was the role of Byzantine army in fighting the Barbarians?

1.4 Methodology

To conduct the research topic, the researcher will use the methods which suits history topics. The researcher will analyses Synesius’ letters in order to provide credible knowledge and information of this topic. Modern scholarship on Synesius has engaged with his writings, but the subject has only occasionally attracted attention and has yet to undergo systematic analysis. His letters, in

particular, provide a valuable commentary on life in Cyrene, reflecting the social and cultural dynamics of the region. They frequently distinguish between the Greco-Roman inhabitants of Cyrene and the so-called “Barbarians,” or native Libyans. The present study approaches this topic by examining the evidence contained in Synesius’ correspondence, where numerous examples illustrate his perspectives. The paper is organized into three sections. The first considers the meaning and usage of the term “Barbarians” in the period during which Synesius lived. The second investigates the role Synesius himself may have played in resistance against the Barbarians, drawing upon his letters to demonstrate his hostility toward them. The third section analyses the same correspondence to shed light on the apparent absence of Byzantine military support in Cyrene. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the principal findings of each section.

2-The Term Barbarians

The word barbarian was originally applied to people who differed from the Greeks and Romans, mainly in language (Kum, 2023). Later, Arabs used the term to refer to the native inhabitants of North Africa. (Trix & Walbridge, 2008) The relationship between Romans and barbarians is often portrayed as one of hostility and fighting. However, there is also evidence of trade, alliances, and periods of peace. Drawing on literary sources, archaeology, and long-term study, Burns analyses Roman-barbarian relations across five centuries, from the late 2nd Century B.C. to the early 5th Century A.D. He challenges the stereotypes of ancient writers, noting: “The barbarians were not all the same and never had been, but because in literature and imperial propaganda they still served the same singular purpose [...] to be humbled before the power of the emperor [...] they were still portrayed as one people, thirsting after Roman blood and booty just as in all the centuries past” (Burns, 2003).

Burns instead presents a more nuanced view, showing how barbarians gradually became integrated into the Roman world, with relations evolving from hostility to tolerance, and even stability. Economic links between Romans and barbarians were widespread. For instance, Roman traders exchanged goods with the Celts, who in the 2nd Century B.C. produced high-quality ironware in southern and central Gaul. Archaeological finds reveal that many Celtic elites possessed Roman goods, demonstrating extensive trade (Burns, 2009). Burns also observes that barbarian societies were hierarchical, with elites playing a central role. Roman support often strengthened these local aristocracies. As he explains: “Gauls almost everywhere were governed by elite families, which were bonded together through marriage and service within the community and region” (Burns, 2003).

Rome offered protection and political legitimacy to these families, though it rarely interfered in their religious life. The major exception was the suppression of the Druids in Gaul, whose influence was perceived as a threat to Roman authority. Contrary to the stereotype of constant conquest, Rome was often reluctant to wage war against its barbarian neighbors. Military campaigns were costly, and even successful ones did not always guarantee lasting security. Indeed, by the mid-1st Century B.C., barbarians were already serving in the Roman army, and by the late 4th Century some even held positions of command (Pohl, 2009).

3-Synesius and the Barbarians Raids

It may be argued that the natural environment of the Cyrenaican region, its climate and terrain, rendered it an area of attraction for various peoples and civilizations. The region experienced several distinct political phases, beginning with Greek settlement, followed by Roman rule, and later the Byzantine period. In the initial years after the establishment of Greek colonies, relations between the Libyans and the Greeks were characterized by coexistence and openness (Herodotus, 2010). With the arrival and settlement of the Greeks in Cyrenaica, however, the political

landscape was transformed and the demographic composition altered through the introduction of a new Greek element. Intermarriage between Libyans and Greeks produced a mixed population that bore the characteristics of both groups (Jones, 1971). Over time, the Greeks gradually appropriated land from its original inhabitants, redistributing it among the newcomers, and forced the Libyans from their fertile lands into the barren desert (Herodotus, 2010). This geographic and social division, imposed by the Greeks, ultimately rendered reconciliation impossible as time progressed. It appears that the gap between the Libyan tribes and the Romans widened, as the Romans sought to isolate the Libyan tribes from the rest of society and deliberately avoided interaction with Barbarians (Hazawi, 2021).

The first major Barbarians attacks on the cities of the Pentapolis occurred around 390 A.D., and these only increased in frequency, spreading fear among the urban population. Synesius offers a contemptuous description of the raiders, portraying them as “wretched creatures on horseback,” driven into battle not by courage or strategy but by hunger. According to him, they were prepared to risk their lives for the chance to seize even the most basic goods, underscoring both their desperation and their predatory character (Crawford, 2022).

Although they even besieged strongholds, and withdrew to the desert with their spoils, as was their custom. Synesius wrote, that in later years, a new and more formidable people, the Ausurians, descended upon Cyrenaica. Unlike the Macetae, they were numerous, organized, and relentless. They destroyed villages, besieged cities, carrying off sacred vessels and enslaving captives of every age. So many were taken (Thory, 2021). Synesius paints a bleak picture: women wailing at the enemy’s approach, men slaughtered like cattle, the stench of decay fouling the air, and the sky blackened by vultures. (Hazawi, 2016) In one letter he laments that the enemy had camped on his own estate; in another, written during the siege of Ptolemais, he writes, “tomorrow by the aid of God I may vanquish the enemy, or, that, not to say anything of ill omen, I shall vanquish him in a second attempt” (Fitzgerald, 1926).

The Barbarians attacks intensified throughout the region, spreading fear among the population. In Letter 125, Synesius recounts how the Berbers burned farms, abducted men, women, and children, and carried out acts of plunder. Exploiting the evident incompetence of the Byzantine soldiers (Fitzgerald, 1926).

Synesius appears to have played an important role in organizing resistance to these attacks by enlisting the ordinary inhabitants of the Pentapolis. In a letter to his brother, Evoptius, he reports that the Berbers traversed the country, plundering and killing in the absence of effective Byzantine military resistance. He further suggests mobilizing the peasants the tillers of the soil to confront the enemy in order to safeguard their wives, children, homeland, and, as he adds, even the soldiers themselves (Fitzgerald, 1926).

Synesius’ hatred of the Barbarians from the south is evident when he remarks that he cannot even grant them the name of “enemy,” adding that he wishes he could find still stronger words with which to characterize them. This hostility appears to stem largely from fear and from his ignorance of the Libyans living beyond the frontier. In a letter to his brother, Synesius acknowledges his desire to learn more about those who had shown such daring in their resistance against the Romans. Yet it was precisely this mixture of fear and unfamiliarity that contributed to the perception of the Barbarians as inhuman. In Letter 122, Synesius further observes that the courage displayed by those who had triumphed over the Barbarians revealed “the barbarians are not Corybantes nor the demons who serve Rhea, but men like ourselves, who can be wounded and killed” (Fitzgerald, 1926).

In a letter to his brother, Synesius expresses both despair and determination. He warns that “at this rate we shall no longer look like men,” and insists that he must confront the barbarians personally to test the strength of enemies who, in his words, “stop at nothing” and “dare to laugh

the Romans to scorn". He adds a striking proverb that even "can shoulder the burden of many asses" (Fitzgerald, 1926).

In a letter to his brother Synesius laments that communication brought only bad news: Battia had been seized, Aprosyliis attacked, threshing floors burned, fields ravaged, women sold into slavery, and men killed without mercy. Whereas in earlier raids young boys were carried off alive, Synesius observed that the raiders now killed them, likely because their small numbers made it impossible to guard captives while continuing warfare (Fitzgerald, 1926).

In one letter, Synesius offers a strikingly practical description of his preparations for battle. He records that he had acquired three hundred lances and an equal number of scimitars, though only ten double-edged swords, since such weapons were not manufactured locally. He observes, however, that the scimitar inflicted a more devastating wound and would therefore serve his forces well. Lacking standard military equipment, Synesius explains that his men supplemented their arsenal with improvised weapons. Clubs could be fashioned from the durable wild-olive trees of the region, while others carried single-edged hatchets in their belts. By striking at enemy shields with these tools, they forced their opponents into direct combat, compensating for the defenders' lack of armor (Ana de Francisco Heredero & Susana, 2014).

He also anticipates an imminent confrontation. Scouts had clashed with a band of Berbers, who, rather than retreating, issued a challenge, declaring they would remain in place to test what kind of men dared to leave their homes and march out against seasoned nomadic warriors. Synesius ends with a mixture of confidence and pious humility, expressing the hope that, with God's help, he would achieve victory if not in the first battle, then in a second (Fitzgerald, 1930).

During one Berber incursion, Synesius dispatched an envoy to the Byzantine commander to request military assistance. However, before any relief could arrive, the city was destroyed. As he reports, the envoy had scarcely been sent when the enemy spread en masse across the countryside, leaving devastation in their wake. 'All is lost, all is destroyed,' he laments, noting that at the time of writing, only a few cities remained (Fitzgerald, 1926).

Synesius' letters provide considerable detail about the conflict with the Berbers. Over time, the cultural divide between Berbers and Byzantines grew increasingly pronounced. The Cyrenaicans sought to distance themselves from Berber groups, avoiding interaction and attempting to exclude them from communal life (Fitzgerald, 1930).

This attitude is reflected in Synesius addressed to Emperor Arcadius in Constantinople, where he urged that Berber populations likely the urban groups be barred from both government service and enlistment in the Byzantine army. Synesius' hostility, however, was not unique. It reflected a broader Roman cultural outlook in which the Berbers, like other "barbarian" peoples, were regarded with suspicion and exclusion.

From examination of the above, one can conclude that Synesius himself appears to have played a significant role in organizing the defence against these attacks, mobilizing the ordinary inhabitants of the Pentapolis into an army. In doing so, he assumed a dual role as both bishop and military leader, embodying the intersection of spiritual authority and civic responsibility Synesius; rather, it reflects a wider pattern in late antiquity whereby bishops increasingly assumed political, administrative, and even military functions when imperial Synesius' leadership against the Libyan threat illustrates both the weakness of Byzantine military presence in Cyrenaica.

4-The Military Co-operation

Byzantine military support was learned to be weak from Synesius' Letter 133, a vulnerability that encouraged further Berber incursions. Writing to his friend Olympius, Synesius that the ineffectiveness of the generals resulted in the surrender of the country to the enemy without

resistance. Survival was limited to those who secured fortified positions, whereas those captured in the open plains were systematically slaughtered (Fitzgerald, 1926).

Synesius describes the deteriorating situation in Cyrenaica, blaming the cowardice of Byzantine generals for delivering the country to the enemy without a fight. Only those who managed to seize fortified positions survived, while those caught in the plains, he laments, were massacred “like victims for sacrifice” (Fitzgerald, 1926).

In a letter addressed to the general Marcellinus, when he first arrived in Cyrenaica, Synesius recalls, the cities of the Pentapolis faced a twofold crisis: external assaults from the Berbers and internal decay stemming from undisciplined troops and the corruption of their commanders (Arne, 1991).

Marcellinus, in Synesius’ account, appeared almost as a divine savior. In a single day’s battle, he routed the enemy, and through his persistent vigilance he restored discipline among the soldiers and order within the cities. By overcoming both the external and internal threats, he was able to re-establish peace in the region.

Although Synesius may have exaggerated the failures of the military leadership, the evidence suggests that Byzantine forces were indeed unable to withstand the growing scale of Berber attacks in Cyrenaica. He reports, for instance, that the commander Cerialis avoided battle altogether, choosing instead to load his gold onto double-sailed merchant ships. While at sea, he sent orders to the people “to attempt any sortie” (Fitzgerald, 1930). Synesius’ letters reveal not only his frustration with such leaders but also his anger at the weakness and demoralization of the ordinary soldiers.

Synesius also refers to Joannes, a military leader whose reputation alone was said to deter invasion. Reports of his illness were dismissed as false; indeed, he mocked those who believed them. Joannes claimed that he had been summoned from afar to provide assistance and that the districts which called upon him were spared, since the enemy, alarmed by the mere rumor of his approach, chose not to invade. Once he had restored order there, he advanced quickly into the threatened province, waiting in readiness for the barbarians provided they remained unaware of his presence (Bregman, 2024).

Elsewhere, he criticizes military leadership, remarking that generals allowed the country to fall “without a single battle,” while civilians were slaughtered or enslaved. He accuses the commander Cerialis of abandoning the population, loading his wealth onto ships rather than confronting the enemy. Synesius even describes his own attempts to organize local resistance, urging his brother to gather peasants and townsmen to defend their families and land in the absence of Byzantine support (Fitzgerald, 1926).

These accounts highlight both the scale of devastation in the Pentapolis and the collapse of confidence in imperial protection. Synesius’ testimony suggests that Berber incursions not only disrupted agriculture and depopulated rural communities but also contributed to the erosion of Christianity and Roman identity in the region.

Synesius also condemns the passivity of the civilian population, remarking that “none of us shows any indignation. We remain helpless in our homes. We always wait for our soldiers to defend us, and a sorry help they are!” (Fitzgerald, 1926). He notes bitterly that people spend their time complaining about the soldiers’ pay and privileges in peacetime, instead of rising to confront the barbarians themselves. For Synesius, this criticism reflects both the weakness of the military and the erosion of civic responsibility within Cyrenaican society.

In one striking letter to his brother, Synesius recounts an episode in which clerics and peasants took up arms in defense of their community while the professional soldiers remained hidden in the mountains. He praises the priests of Axomis for rallying local farmers directly from the

church doors and leading them into combat, invoking God's aid before erecting a trophy of victory in the Myrtle Valley (Fitzgerald, 1926).

The battle itself unfolded in dramatic fashion. The Berbers, assuming no resistance, advanced rashly into a wooded ravine where they were confronted by Faustus, a deacon of the church. Synesius emphasizes Faustus' courage: unarmed at first, he seized a stone, struck down an enemy soldier, stripped him of his armor, and pressed the attack. His leadership, both in personal combat and in issuing timely orders, inspired the defenders and turned the tide of battle. Synesius interprets this victory symbolically. The triumph of peasants and clergy over seasoned raiders demonstrated that the Berbers were not supernatural forces "not Corybantes nor the demons who serve Rhea" but merely men, capable of being defeated (Hooper & Schwartz, 2018). For Synesius, the engagement offered proof that courage and unity could compensate for the absence of formal military discipline. While acknowledging that the defenders were only fifteen irregulars fighting in difficult terrain, he suggests that with greater organization they might have achieved an even more decisive victory in open battle.

In a letter to the commander Anysius, Synesius contrasts the courage of the Unnigardae with the failings of other troops stationed in the Pentapolis. He argues that no force was of greater value to the region, praising the Unnigardae both as men and as soldiers. Unlike other "native" or auxiliary units, who often hesitated even when numerically superior, the Unnigardae repeatedly proved their worth. Synesius recalls that with only forty men they faced enemies numbering over a thousand and, with divine aid and Anysius' leadership, secured resounding victories. He likens their vigilance to guard-dogs protecting a flock: constantly patrolling the hills, ready to spring out against the threat of barbarian attack (Fitzgerald, 1926). Through this imagery, Synesius underscores their role not only as soldiers but as guardians of the community, embodying the martial discipline and loyalty that he found lacking in Byzantine regulars.

5-Conclusion

Relations between the Barbarians and Romans were wavering, as they could alternate between hostility and alliance over time. The written records evidence indicates that Barbarians resided among the Cyrenaicans, and interaction between Greeks and Barbarians during the Ptolemaic period, though not entirely antagonistic, was largely marked by conflict. While modern historians frequently interpret Berber raids as pragmatic responses to economic pressures, Synesius does not represent them in this way. Instead, he consistently attributes responsibility to the Berber people collectively, referring to them in his letters simply as "the enemy". The letters of Synesius discussed above shed considerable light on this conflict. They reveal a widening cultural divide between the Berbers and the Byzantines. During this period, the Cyrenaicans sought to marginalize Berber groups from the broader community, deliberately avoiding interaction with them. Further evidence of this perspective appears in Synesius' *De Regno*, delivered to Emperor Arcadius in Constantinople, where he explicitly urges the exclusion of the (likely urban) Berber populations from both the structures of government and the ranks of the Byzantine army. Synesius gives strikingly practical descriptions of military preparedness decline and the failure of defense, and the desperate state of local defenses.

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