The Earthquake of A.D. 551 and the Birth-date of Agathias

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In a brilliant note in his *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, Ernest Stein creates order out of the chaos which subsists in much of the ancient testimony relating to the Syro-Phoenician earthquake of A.D. 551. A primary source for this earthquake is the passage in Agathias' *Histories* on seismic phenomena at Berytus, Alexandria, Cos and elsewhere. Stein was the first to see that this passage, which occurs immediately after Agathias' account of the year 555, refers to the earthquake of 551 and not that of 554, as had previously been assumed. His comment is, however, necessarily concise and offers no explanation of the chronological licence involved. Some elucidation of this and of the passage as a whole is worth attempting, particularly as the Coan disaster is crucial for determining the birth-date of Agathias.

By the end of *Histories* 2.14, Agathias has taken his narrative to the latter part of 555 (death of Theudibald) and has glanced forward to the death of Childebert in 558 or 559. He continues (2.15 *init.*) as follows:

1 II (Paris-Brussels-Amsterdam 1949) 757 n.5.
2 2.15-17, pp.203ff Dindorf.
3 "Voulant faire état de son témoignage oculaire, Agathias parle du tremblement de terre de 551 bien qu'il sorte du cadre chronologique de son ouvrage; après avoir terminé son récit de la guerre d'Italie, qu'il raconte jusqu'en 555, Agath. II 15 *int.* introduit son récit du séisme par les mots 'Υπὸ δὲ τῶν αὐτῶν χρόνων, θέρος ὁμοιός, κτλ., façon d'enchaîner dont il serait faux de conclure qu'il confond le séisme de 551 avec celui du 11 juillet 555 (Theophan. A.M. 6047; dans le texte, je crois pouvoir omettre ce séisme-là, comme n'étant pas assez important)." There were earthquakes at Constantinople in both 554 and 555 (infra n.2).
4 Lists of earthquakes in the Byzantine world have been compiled most recently by C. Downey in *Speculum* 30 (1955) 596; V. Grumel, *Traité d'études byzantines I, La Chronologie* (Paris 1958) 476; and N. N. Ambraseys, *Bulletin of the Seismological Society of America* 52.4 (1962) 895. The last of these is of particular interest as presenting a scientist's evaluation of the ancient evidence concerning seismic sea-waves; I am grateful to Professor G. Y. Craig and Dr P. L. Willmore for drawing my attention to this and the other geological paper cited infra n.9.
5 Cf. Stein *op.cit.* (supra n.1) II.816f, 609f.
Agathias uses ὑπὸ in similar temporal expressions elsewhere, once with exactness (2.16 ὑπὸ τὸν αὐτὸν χρόνον, vide infra), once more vaguely (2.17 ὑπὸ δὲ τοὺς Ἀὐγοῦστου καίσαρος χρόνους, vide infra); hence it could mean ‘at’ or ‘about the same time’ here, and linguistic criteria will not decide for us whether Agathias means his opening sentence to refer to events of 555 or earlier. In the next sentence, however, he indubitably goes on to talk of 551 (vide infra); so that it is natural to understand the opening sentence as referring to the seismic phenomena which occurred throughout the Eastern Empire in 551.8 Hence ὑπὸ means ‘about the same time’, and Agathias is guilty of sleight-of-hand in not making clear that he has regressed four years in his time-sequence.7 In his second sentence he continues:

Ἀρρυτὸς γοῦν ἡ καλλιστή, τὸ Φοινίκων τέως ἐγκαλλώπισμα, τότε δὲ ἀπηγαλασθη ἀπάζω καὶ κατέρριπτο τὰ κλεινὰ ἔκεινα καὶ περιλάλητα τῆς οἰκοδομίας δαισάλματα, ὡς μηδὲν ὄτιον σχεδόν που λειφθῆναι ἢ μόνα τῆς κατασκευῆς τὰ ἐδάφη, κτλ.

As Stein pointed out, this can refer only to the earthquake and tidal-wave of 551, which killed at least thirty thousand people and damaged the city irreparably.8 Agathias is silent about the withdrawal of the

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8 For Syria, Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, Palestine and Arabia, July 551, see Malalas Chron. 485b, Theophanes, Chron., anno mundi 6043, Fragmentum Tusculanum in Migne, PG 85 (1864) 1821c, etc.; cf. Stein op.cit. (supra n.1) II.757 n.5; for Central Greece, see Procop. De Bellis 8.25,16ff (= Goth. 4.25), occurring without mention of season in the account of the year June 551 to June 552.

7 Since only Agathias of the authorities known to me mentions an earthquake at Constantinople in 551, I do not exclude the possibility that his opening sentence intends a reference to the earthquakes at Constantinople in 553 (after June 2, but recorded only by Victor Tonnennensis, Chron. anno 553,2 and Cyrillus of Scythopolis Vita S.Sabae ed. E. Schwartz (Leipzig 1939) 199,96f, and perhaps identical with the following, cf. Stein, op.cit. (supra n.1) II.757 n.5, 758 n.3); at Constantinople, Nicomedia and elsewhere, 15 August 554, for forty days, see Malalas Chron. 486b, Theoph. anno mundi 6046, etc. (the earthquake id. anno mundi 6034 is a doublet, cf. Stein II.827f); at Constantinople, 11 July 555, see Theoph. anno mundi 6047. These all happened in summer, and Agathias might be using the phrase θέρους ὥρα to cloak an allusion to all the earthquakes in 551–5. This would minimise the chronological liberty.

sea and the subsequent tidal wave which cast vessels on to dry land, perhaps because he was reluctant to include in his work an event which to contemporary eyes must have partaken of the miraculous.

After mentioning the temporary removal of the Law School to Sidon, and its later return to Berytus, Agathias continues:

τότε δὲ καὶ ἐν τῇ μεγάλῃ Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ τῇ πρὸς τῷ Νείλῳ ἰδρυμένῃ ποταμῷ, καὶ ταύτα οὐκ εἰσώθησε σεἰσθαι τὸ χάριον, εὐναίασθαι τις τοῦ κλάνου ἐλαχίστῃ μὲν καὶ ἀφαυρότατη καὶ οὐ πάμπαν ἀρίδηλος, γέγονε δὲ ὅμως, κτλ.

(The tremor was mild at Alexandria, because Egypt would be on the fringe of an earthquake the epicentre of which was in Syro-Phoenicia.) Agathias tells us that he was at this time sojourning at the rhetorical schools in Alexandria. After a quasi-scientific consideration of why Egypt had till that time been free of earthquakes he continues (2.16 init.):

Κατ’ ἐκείνο γὰρ τοῦ καυροῦ καὶ Ἡ Γώς ἡ νήσος ἡ πρὸς τῷ τέρματι τοῦ Ἀίγαλος κειμένη, ἐλάχιστον τι μέρος αὐτῆς ἐσέωστο, ἡ δὲ ἀλή ἀπασα ἑπετυκεί, ποικίλα τε αὐτῇ καὶ ἀνήκουσα προσεγένετο πάθη, κτλ.

Agathias goes on to relate how the main town on the island of Cos (cf. οἱ ἀστοὶ, τὸ ἀστυ, τῇ πόλει) was destroyed by a tidal wave. The phrase κατ’ ἐκείνο τοῦ καυροῦ is usually employed by Agathias to denote some well-defined time. Agathias’ own linguistic usage, therefore, implies that Cos was destroyed by a tidal wave at the same time as Berytus.

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10 Other accounts of this incline to homily, cf. especially Joannes Episcopus Ephesius, Comm. de Beatis Orientalibus, ed. Van Douwen and Land (Amsterdam 1889) 241f, under the false date of anno Sel. 870; Nicephorus Uranus, loc.cit. (supra n.9), who confuses this event with the earthquakes of 554 and 557, cf. Stein op.cit. (supra n.1) II.757 n.5; and Michael Syrus, Chron. 2.244ff ed. J.-B. Chabot (Paris 1899), confusing events of 528-9, 551, 554 and 557.

11 ἢμοι δὲ γε καὶ αὐτῷ, ἐπιγένητον γὰρ αὐτοῦ διατριβήν παιδείας ἐνεκα τῆς πρὸ τῶν νόμων, δεδεινα προσεξῆς, κτλ. reading with Niebuhr πρὸ for the πρῶς of cod. R. The latter reading cannot be right, since the teaching of Law at Alexandria had been forbidden since 533; see Justinian Dig., Constitutio Omnen 7.

12 Hist. Praef. 139,12 Dindorf (A.D. 542), 1.5 (winter 552-3), 2.26 (accession of Artaxares to the throne of Persia, A.D. 226, cf. 4.24), 3.14 (winter 555-6), 4.15 (apparently = 'at that season of the year', i.e. winter), 4.25 (A.D. 363), 5.11 (558-9); at 2.17 fin., however, it is more general, = 'at that epoch', of events forty-four years apart (infra n.23).
(It would be natural to date the inundations round the Gulf of Malia in mainland Greece to the same time.)

Agathias himself landed at Cos when sailing from Alexandria to Constantinople at this time, and gives a harrowing account of conditions there after the catastrophe. What occasioned his voyage to Constantinople? Most probably he was on his way to start at the Law School there, having completed his rhetorical studies in the same summer. It is not easy to argue from this to his age at the time, since the duration of the rhetorical course regularly varied between one and six years (if we can judge by the state of affairs at Antioch in Libanius’s time), and the starting-age could be as low as eleven or twelve. But sixteen or thereabouts seems to have been a frequent starting-age for higher education of all types, while Agathias’ literary competence can scarcely have been acquired in less than a three-year stay. If, therefore, Agathias had begun at Alexandria at sixteen and had spent three years there by 551, he would have been born not later than 532. Even if fear of a further earthquake led him to quit Alexandria before finishing the course, this would not retard his birth-date beyond 533, since it is difficult to believe that he spent less than two years at rhetorical school. At all events, Agathias could not have been more than twenty in 551, as law-students seem not to have been allowed to prolong their studies beyond the age of twenty-five, and the course lasted five years.

To show that such disasters are not peculiar to his own epoch (2.17;
cf. 2.16 fin.), Agathias recounts the earthquake at Tralles ὑπὸ τοὺς Ἀγαθίας τοὺς Αχαίας καὶ σαρκαρος χρόνους.20 Agathias is using the Patria of Tralles,21 and is correct in his assertion that Augustus was in Cantabria when the Trallean envoy Chaeremon sought him.22 Agathias claims to have seen Chaeremon’s monument outside Tralles and quotes the verse inscription which it bears (mention of Tralles thus allows him to introduce more of his own personal testimony). Many other cities of Asia, he says, both Ionian and Aeolian, suffered similarly κατ’ ἐκεῖνῳ τοῦ καυροῦ.23 This ends Agathias’ earthquake-narrative.

Returning to his main theme of Justinian’s wars (2.18 init.), Agathias passes to the campaigns in Lazica against Persia, ἐπεὶ καὶ κατὰ τοὺς αὐτοὺς χρόνους ἐπράττετο ἐκαστα. The plural χρόνους is intentionally vague (cf. its use in 2.17 supra) and allows him to leave the earthquake of 551 and resume the thread of events in 555, passing from Italy (2.14 fin.) to Mermeroes’ return to Lazica in 554 or Spring 555 (2.19).24 In between (2.18, 19 init.), he gives a brief history of the Lazi and of the Roman and Persian confrontation in Lazica 541–552.25 His new viewpoint allows him to refer to the Five Years’ Truce of 551 as ὁλγαφ ἐμπροσθεν (2.18 init.).

Clearly Agathias wrote his earthquake-account because he wished, as Stein says, to make use of his own eye-witness testimony. But one desires some explanation of why he chose to interpose it where he did and not at some point in his narrative nearer to 551. The explanation is, I believe, connected with the extreme paucity of the factual evidence which he has been able to present in his Histories up to this point. Agathias had not been present on the Italian campaign, and his ignorance of the military operations of 552–555 and of the geography of Italy is plain.26 It is very likely that these deficiencies had

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20 27 b.c., see Hieronym. Chron. p.164 Helm; Strabo 12.8.18.
21 ταῦτα δὲ ὦτῶν ἔκειναθήναι δῆλον μὲν ποὺ καὶ ἢ πάτριος τοῦ ἀστεος ιστορία, 208,25 Dindorf.
22 Cf. CAH (Cambridge 1934) 10, 343.
23 The catastrophe of A.D. 17, which affected more than a dozen Asian cities; see Furneaux on Tac. Ann. 2.47, Helm on Hieronym. Chron. pp.172, 397. Presumably κατ’ ἐκεῖνῳ τοῦ καυροῦ has a broad application here.
24 Cf. Stein op.cit. (supra n.1) II.513.
26 Cf. the severe criticisms by M. Ites in BZ 26 (1928) 281ff, with the comments of Stein II.606 nn., 608 n.3.
been pointed out to Agathias by friends who had read Book I or heard it declaimed, because at 3.1, in what is virtually a second preface to his work, he adopts a defensive tone, complaining of lack of time to gather and examine material (236, 12ff Dindorf):

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\eta\ γάρ\ μοι\ εὐγγραφή,\ τούτο δή\ τὸ\ μέγιστὸν\ τε\ καὶ\ σεμνότατον\ ἔργον\ καὶ\ πάσης\ ἀσχολίας\ ὑπέρτερον,\ εἴποι\ ἂν\ η\ λύρα\ η\ Βουλτικα,\ ὁδὸς\ τε\ καὶ\ βίου\ πάρεργον\ γίγνεται\ καὶ\ οὐκ\ ἐνεστὶ\ μοι\ ὡς\ ἡδίστα\ ἐμβιώναι\ τοῖς\ ποθομένοις.\ δέον\ γάρ\ τούς\ πάλαι\ σοφοὺς\ σχολαίτερον\ ἀναλέγεσθαι\ μμήσεως\ ἕκαστη,\ ἀπαντά\ τε\ τὰ\ ἐκκαταχοῦ\ ἐνμερόμενα\ γνωματεύειν\ ἐς\ τὸ\ ἀκριβὲς\ καὶ\ ἀναπνοθάνεσθαι,\ ἀνειμένον\ τε\ ἀμφὶ\ ταῦτα\ ἔχειν\ τὸν\ νοῦ\ καὶ\ ἐλεύθερον,\ ἀλλ'\ ἔγγυς\ ἡμένος\ ἐν\ τῇ\ βασιλείᾳ\ στοῖς\ βιβλίοις\ πολλά\ δικά\ ἀνάπλεα\ καὶ\ προγράμματον\ ἐς\ ἐνθυμοῦ\ μέχρι\ καὶ\ ἓσ\ ἦλιον\ καταδύντα\ ἐκμελετῶ\ καὶ\ ἀνελίττω .. . ,
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and especially 237, 6ff:

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πλὴν\ ἀλλ'\ οὖδ'\ ὡς\ ἂν\ σωφρονισμὸσ\ ἐστ'\ ἂν\ ὃ\ ἔρως\ με\ ἂγάφη,\ εἰ\ καὶ\ μοι\ τις\ νεμοσής\ εἰς\ ὕπερτέρων\ ἐφιεμένῳ\ καὶ\ τὸ\ λεγόμενον\ ἐν\ πίθῳ\ φιλοργοῦντι\ τὴν\ κεραμέαν,\ εἰ\ γὰρ\ τῷ\ καὶ\ δόξειν\ εἴναι\ τὰ\ μᾶ\ νόθα\ γε\ ὡς\ ἁληθώς\ καὶ\ ἀνεμαία\ καὶ\ οὐ\ συχῆς\ ἐς\ πλείωσα\ μεριζομένης\ κύματα,\ ἀλλ'\ εἴμαι\ τοὺς\ υός\ ἀρέσκοιμι\ ἂν,\ καθάπερ\ τῶν\ ἰδοντων\ οἱ\ ἁμοστόται.
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The need to say “ipse vidi” might thus have been compelling, and Agathias’ own experiences in 551 gave an opportunity for this. The account which he designed could not, however, be introduced without some violence to chronological rigour, since Procopius had already described the events of 551 in De Bellis VIII, and Agathias’ own narrative did not start till late 552. From an aesthetic point of view, the earthquake-account was well suited to stand as a transitional passage between Italy and the other end of the Empire, because it deals with events in the Byzantine heartland. It also gave relief from the military narrative and provided an opportunity to introduce items of cultural, antiquarian and scientific interest, all of which were possibly closer to Agathias’ heart than military history.

It is instructive to compare with this the chronological liberty taken

by Agathias in 4.23, where he post-dates the recall of Nachoragan to 557 instead of 556 (a year, that is, after his defeat by the Romans) and relates the events of one year, Spring 556 to Winter 556–7, as if they belonged to two years (cf. Stein II.812). There also, I think, aesthetic considerations play a part. For, by postponing mention of the flaying of Nachoragan until he has disposed of his military account, Agathias leaves himself free to lead his narrative by way of an elegant sequence of parallel stories (Apollo and Marsyas, including a quotation from Nonnus; Sapor and Valerian) to the establishment of the Sassanid dynasty by Sapor’s predecessor Artaxares (4.23 fin.). He can then end Book IV tidily with the chronological list of Sassanid Kings promised by him at 2.27, followed by the Truce of 557. Agathias might have been the readier to take liberties with the date of Nachoragan’s recall if, as Stein believed (II.812), he was already in doubt or confusion about the other events of 556.

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