A Correspondent of Iamblichus

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The correspondence of the emperor Julian, as transmitted in various manuscripts, includes six letters addressed to the philosopher Iamblichus (Epp. 181, 183-187 Bidez-Cumont). Since Iamblichus died before Julian was born, it is impossible that the emperor could ever have written to the philosopher. On the other hand, the letters do not read like the productions of a deliberate forger, nor do they simulate an emperor's authorship. On internal criteria, one would naturally interpret them as letters from an absent pupil to his former teacher. Accordingly, Franz Cumont argued that these six letters, together with another two (Epp. 180, 182) and possibly another ten (Epp. 188-197), are genuine letters, which were mistakenly attributed to the emperor Julian because their real author was Julianus of Caesarea, otherwise known as a sophist active in Athens in the early fourth century. Joseph Bidez subsequently amplified Cumont's arguments into a study of Iamblichus and his circle which remains, after more than fifty years, the standard account of the philosopher's life.

The central thesis of Cumont and Bidez seems as secure as the nature of the case admits, but their deductions from it need some important modifications. First, as Bidez and Cumont later realised, a sophist from Caesarea in Cappadocia (Suda I 435) cannot be supposed to have written these letters, for one of the letters to Iamblichus states that writer and recipient share the same fatherland (Ep. 183, 448b): that must mean at least that both are Syrians. On the available evidence, therefore, the correspondent of Iamblichus should be left

1 J. Bidez and F. Cumont, Iuliani Imperatoris Epistulae et Leges (Paris and London 1922) 238-55 [hereafter, BIDEZ AND CUMONT]. In W. C. Wright's Loeb edition, these six letters bear the numbers 76-78, 75, 74, 79.
2 F. Cumont, Sur l'authenticité de quelques lettres de Julien (Université de Gand Travaux 3, 1889) 12ff.
4 Bidez and Cumont 228.
anonymous. Second, and more serious, Bidez and Cumont misinterpreted the one historical allusion in these letters which can be identified and dated with confidence (Ep. 181, 449A). As a result, they located the correspondent of Iamblichus at the wrong imperial court: on their interpretation he was with Constantine, whereas in reality he was with Licinius when this emperor fought against Constantine. Similarly, and on the basis of the interpretation and chronology of Bidez and Cumont, a recent account of the career of Sopater uses Epp. 184 and 185 as alluding to Constantine in Nicomedia and Constantinople. It will be salutary to examine closely what the letters really disclose about Iamblichus and his former pupil.

In Ep. 181 (448D-50A), Iamblichus’ friend reports his escape from a series of dangers. The worst which he has suffered is the long separation from Iamblichus, even though he has endured καὶ πολέμων θορύβου καὶ πολιορκίας ἀνάγκην καὶ φυγῆς πλάνην καὶ φόβους παντοτικός, ἐτὶ δὲ καὶ χειμῶν κυμβολάς καὶ νόσων κυνδύνου καὶ τὰς ἐκ Παννονίας τῆς ἀνω μέχρι τοῦ κατὰ τὸν Καλχηδόνιον πορθμὸν διάπλου μυρίας δὴ καὶ πολυτρόπους συμφορὰς . . .

Cumont and Bidez proposed to connect these adventures with the Sarmatian invasion of A.D. 323, while W. C. Wright argued that the writer accompanied Constantine in his campaign against Licinius in the following year. Neither proposal will fit the indications of the text. If the writer complains of enduring “the necessity of a siege and the wandering of flight,” that implies that he was besieged himself
and then fled from a beleaguered or captured city, not that he was the camp-follower of a victorious army which besieged and captured others. Moreover, Constantine began the campaign of 324 from Thessalonica, and there was no fighting in or near Upper Pannonia, which lay far to the west of the boundary between his and Licinius’ territory. Nor would the Sarmatian invasion of 323 have compelled anyone to flee from Upper Pannonia to Asia Minor. On the contrary, since the invaders crossed the lower Danube (while Constantine sallied forth to meet them from Thessalonica and fought at Campona, Margus and Bononia), such a journey would in fact have been more difficult in 323 than at almost any other time in the early fourth century.

One occasion, and one only, appears to provide all that the text demands: battles, a siege, flight, bad weather and a journey from Upper Pannonia to the Straits of Chalcedon. That is the first war between Constantine and Licinius in 316/7. The first battle was fought at Cibalae on 8 October 316. The defeated Licinius fled to Sirmium and thence to Hadrianople. After negotiations failed, battle was joined again at the Campus Ardenensis. Again defeated, Licinius withdrew, not in the obvious direction towards Byzantium but obliquely towards Beroea. Constantine advanced incautiously, found his lines of communication broken and was compelled to agree to a negotiated peace, apparently in late January 317. These events provide a background against which the allusions in the letter make perfect sense. Iamblichus’ friend was in Upper Pannonia when war broke out, and he attempted to escape to the East. On the way he was overtaken by Constantine’s army and besieged for a time, perhaps in Sirmium or Serdica, but he gained safety when he reached the Bosporus and crossed into Asia Minor.

A letter written more than two years later (Ep. 184, 416D–17B) describes the occasion of the writing of the earlier letter as well as Iamblichus’ reaction to the news of his friend’s escape: "Ἡλθον ἐκ Παννονίας ἦδη τρίτον ἐτος τοιῶτι, μόλις ἀφ’ ὧν οἴδαμεν κινδύνων καὶ πόνων εσωθείς. ὑπερβασὶ δὲ τοῦ Καλχηδόνιου πορθμὸν καὶ ἐπιταξάς τῇ Νικομήδους

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10 Zos. 2.21; Origo Constantini Imperatoris 21 (vastata Thracia et Moesia); Publilius Optatianus Porphyrius, Carm. 6.18ff, cf. ZPE 20 (1976) 152.

11 On the date (not 314), JRS 63 (1973) 36ff. The summary of the course of the war is based on Origo 15–19.
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Bidez and Cumont argued that Ep. 181 must be the earliest of the extant letters to Iamblichus, and hence they dated Ep. 185 later than Ep. 184 because Ep. 184 complains of Iamblichus' failure to write more than a single, reproachful letter since the time he congratulated his friend on his arrival in Nicomedia more than two years before (417c–18a). It then followed from their dating of Ep. 181 to 323 or 324 that Iamblichus was still alive in or after 325. If correct, the date would be significant, for Eunapius reports that it was only after Iamblichus' death that his favourite pupil Sopater betook himself to the court of Constantine (Vit.phil. 6.2.1, p.462). But there is no internal reason for dating Epp. 185 later than 184: the letters themselves prove only that it cannot have been written between Ep. 181 and 184. Moreover, the chronology of Cumont and Bidez entails a contradiction in the evidence: they argued that Ep. 185 shows Sopater at the court of Constantine in Iamblichus' lifetime, whereas Eunapius states categorically that he went there after his teacher died.

Now Sopater was with the correspondent of Iamblichus in Thrace (Ep. 185, 439c). But his references to Thrace will suit residence at the court of Licinius at least as well as they will support the allusion detected by Bidez and Cumont. The writer commences the letter with

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\[ \text{Socr. HE 1.6.33; Soz. HE 4.16.6.} \]

\[ \text{Bidez and Cumont 237: "haec epistula...manifesto prima est earum quas Iamblichus se misisse refert (sc. scriptor)." In support, they cite only the passage of Ep. 184 quoted above. Similarly, Bidez in the Budé edition (supra n.8) 236.} \]

\[ \text{Bidez, op.cit. (supra n.3) 32, deduced that Iamblichus died ca 325/6.} \]
a complaint (Ep. 185, 438d–39a): "Ω Ζεῦ, πῶς ἔχει καλῶς ἡμᾶς μὲν ἐν Ὑπάκη διάγει τὸν καὶ τοῖς ἐνταῦθα εἰρὸς ἐγχειμάζειν, παρ’ Ἰαμβλίχου δὲ τοῦ καὶ καθάπερ ἐφών ξαφνὸς ἡμῖν τὰς ἐπιστολὰς ἀντὶ χελιδώνων πέμπεται, καὶ μὴ τῇ ἡμῖν εἰναι μηδέπορον παρ’ αὐτὸν ἔλθειν, μητ’ αὐτῷ παρ’ ἡμᾶς ἠκείναι ἐξελθείν; τός ἔν καὶ εἰναι ταῦτα δεξαίτο, εἴναι μὴ Ὑπάξ τις ἡ καὶ Τυρέως ἀντάξιος; The words "in the middle of Thrace" surely imply that the noun is here used in a wide, generic sense, not to denote the small contemporary Roman province of Thracia (in which Byzantium lay). They are entirely appropriate for a man writing from the court of Licinius between 308 and 316: at this period the emperor resided principally on or near the Danube, at Sirmium and elsewhere. An imperial palace has recently been discovered near the ancient Naissus which apparently belonged to a pagan emperor of the early fourth century and was suddenly abandoned: either that or Serdica could be described as lying "in the middle of Thrace."16

III

Epp. 186 and 187 are connected to each other, for the second alludes to extravagant compliments which Iamblichus has bestowed on his friend (405c τῶν γε μὴν παιλαίων καὶ σοφῶν ἄνδρῶν, οἷς ἡμᾶς ἐγκρίνειν ἔθελες παίξων), and these can readily be construed as comments on the speech which accompanied the first letter (421c προσοῦ δὴ καὶ αὐτὸς τὸν λόγον εὑμενει νεύσατι). Moreover, the whole tenor of the first letter indicates that this speech should be the first which Iamblichus' friend has composed since he left him (esp. 420d–21a: ἡμᾶς δὲ ἔδει μὲν, ὡς ἔβην, εἰς τῶν οἰκείων ὀρων ἐστάναι καὶ τῆς ὑπὸ σοῦ μουσικῆς ἐμφασισμένους ἱρμενεύν, ὡσπερ οὗ τὴν Ἀπόλλωνος μαντείαν ἐξ ἀδύτων ἱερῶν προϊόσκαν ἡς χυτὴ δέχονται).

The date and occasion are hard to deduce from the description given: πρῶτον σοι τῶν λόγων, οὗτος βασίλει κελέεσαντι πρὸς τὴν ἀοίδιμον τοῦ πορθμοῦ ζεύξιν ἐναγχος ἐξειρασάμεθα, ἐπειδή τοῦτο ἐστὶ τὸ δοκοῦν, ἀπαρξάμεθα. Bidez and Cumont conjectured τοῦ ποταμοῦ and detected an allusion to the bridge which Constantine built over the Danube in 328.18 More convincingly perhaps, Wright identified the speeches as

15 For Sirmium, Origo 8, 16–19; CIL III 10107.
17 Bidez, op.cit. (supra n.8) 238f.
18 Bidez and Cumont on 252.2. For the bridge, RIC 7.331, Rome 298; Victor, Caes. 41.18; Epit. de Caes. 41.14; Chr.Pasch. 525 Bonn (= Chr.min. 1.233).
ones “on the stock theme of Xerxes and the Hellespont.” If that is correct, then the speech might have been delivered when or shortly after Licinius crossed from Asia Minor into Europe. Since Licinius was in Antioch in autumn 313 (Euseb. HE 9.11.6) and appears to have returned to the Danubian frontier before the end of 315, the writer might have attached himself to Licinius' court when he was in Syria in 313 or 314 and accompanied him westwards.

IV

The chronological conclusions argued so far can easily be summarised: the earliest of the six letters to Iamblichus are Epp. 186 and 187, which can be dated to 314/5 by a very speculative argument; Ep. 185 is later than 186 and 187, but was written before October 316; Ep. 181 was written ca March 317 and Ep. 184 more than two years later, in 319. The historical implications of this chronology are important, for the letters to Iamblichus become contemporary evidence for the ethos of Licinius' court and can shed new light on the obscure career of the philosopher.

Iamblichus was born before 250, since he had a son who was already married by 300 (Porph. V.Plot. 9.3–5). His death was traditionally placed ca 330 for two reasons: the Suda states that he flourished in the reign of Constantine (I 27), while Eunapius reports that Sopater went to the court of Constantine and attained influence there only after Iamblichus died. When Bidez rejected the traditional date of ca 330 in favour of ca 325, he argued from his own chronology of the letters, according to which Ep. 187 implies that Iamblichus was already far advanced in age ca 325 (407 AB). If the arguments advanced above are valid, the letter which refers to Iamblichus' extreme old age need be no later than 314/5, and the latest datable evidence that the philosopher was still among the living belongs to 319 (Ep. 184).

19 Wright, op.cit. (supra n.8) 238 n.2.
20 ILS 8938 indirectly attests his presence at Tropaeum Traiani between 314 and 316, and a Danubian campaign in 314 or 315 may be deduced from ILS 8942 and 696, cf. ZPE 20 (1976) 154.
21 A. Cameron, “The Date of Iamblichus' Birth,” Hermes 96 (1968) 374–76.
The letters show that Iamblichus was teaching in Apamea (esp. Ep. 184, 418A), and Libanius later refers to his activity there (Orat. 52.31; cf. Ep. 1447 Wolff = 1389 Foerster). But Malalas states that he taught in Antioch under Galerius (312.11–12 Bonn): ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς αὐτοῦ βασιλείας Ἰάμβλυχος ὁ φιλόσοφος ἐδίδακκεν, οἰκῶν ἐν Δάφνῃ ἐγείρει τῆς τελευτάς αὐτοῦ. Bidez did not consider this notice worthy of attention, and it is definitely untrue that Iamblichus lived at Daphne until his death. But Malalas is often well-informed on local matters concerning Antioch,\(^\text{24}\) and neither the letters nor any other evidence excludes the possibility that Iamblichus taught in Antioch between 293 and 311—or that he lived there until the death of Galerius in 311 or of Maximinus in 313. Iamblichus had previously studied with Porphyry (Eunap. Vit.phil. 5.1.3, p.458), presumably in Rome, but it is not known when he left Porphyry and returned to the East.\(^\text{25}\) It is quite possible, therefore, that Iamblichus taught in Antioch in the 290’s.\(^\text{26}\) It is also possible that he deliberately withdrew to the philosophical centre of Apamea about the time that persecution of the Christians commenced\(^\text{27}\) — perhaps in order to avoid any direct political involvement.\(^\text{28}\)

From Apamea Iamblichus sent his friends and pupils to a pagan court. His anonymous correspondent seems to have resided at the court of Licinius both before and after the war of 316/7, and Iamblichus

\(^{24}\) A. Schenk von Stauffenberg, Die römische Kaisergeschichte bei Malalas (Stuttgart 1931) 407, argues that the notice derives from the ‘Stadtannalen’ of Antioch: he is followed by G. Downey, A History of Antioch in Syria (Princeton 1961) 332.

\(^{25}\) On the relationship between Iamblichus and Porphyry, see H. D. Saffrey, “Abamon, pseudonyme de Jamblique,” in Philomathes. Studies and Essays in the Humanities in memory of P. Merlan (The Hague 1971) 227–39. On one important point, Saffrey’s conclusions are incompatible with those argued here. On his showing (p.231), Iamblichus resided in Apamea before he taught in Antioch. But Iamblichus was still in Apamea when Ep. 184 was written: if the date is 319 (as argued above), that would entail the improbable corollary that he started to teach in Antioch at the age of seventy.

\(^{26}\) Cameron, op.cit. (supra n.21) 375, states, without documentation, that Iamblichus left Rome “after Porphyry’s death ca 303.” For indications in his writings that Iamblichus left Porphyry long before the latter’s death and was in Syria in the 290’s, see J. Dillon, Iamblichi Chalcidensis in Platonis Dialogos Commentariorum Fragmenta (Philosophia Antiqua 23, 1973) 9ff. It has been proposed that, between leaving Porphyry and establishing himself in Syria, Iamblichus spent more than a decade in Alexandria (B. D. Larsen, “La place de Jamblique dans la philosophie antique tardive,” in Entretiens Hardt 21 (Vandœuvres-Genève 1975) 4.


\(^{28}\) At Nicomedia in 303 a philosopher “who dined better at home than in the imperial palace” recited an anti-Christian pamphlet (Lact. Div.Inst. 5.2.2ff). It is tempting to see in him another pupil of Iamblichus—if not the author of the extant letters.
sent Sopater both to Thrace before October 316 and to Nicomedia ca 318 (Epp. 185, 439bc; 184, 417d). The later prominence of Sopater at the court in Constantinople (Eunap. Vit.phil. 6.2.2, 10; Zos. 2.40.3) accordingly gains in significance: despite his Christian policies, Constantine took some care to conciliate, even to cultivate, the pagan intellectuals over whom he ruled. It may be suggested that the quietism of Iamblichus (in contrast to the polemic of Porphyry) permitted his favourite pupil to gain influence at the Christian court and his own ideas to circulate freely in an officially Christian society. But Iamblichus himself did not live (as is still sometimes loosely asserted) “under Constantine.” Although his life overlapped Constantine’s by almost fifty years, he was probably never his subject. When Constantine became emperor of the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire in 324, Iamblichus was probably already dead: if so, he lived, taught, wrote and died under pagan emperors.

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