

Hormisdas and the Late Roman Walls of Thessalonika

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ONE OF the most enigmatic monuments of late antiquity surrounds the tetrarchic capital of Thessalonika on three sides. The city's formidable walls withstood attack from the Avars and Slavs in the late sixth and early seventh centuries and from the Bulgarian czar, Johannitzes, in 1207 but were less of an obstacle to the Arabs in 904, the Normans in 1185 and the Turks in 1430. What has attracted most attention in recent years is the problem of dating their construction. Disagreement prevails about masonry style, the existence of what appear to be seats from the hippodrome in their foundations, and the similarity of brickstamps found in the walls and those found in other monuments. Although these stylistic considerations all point to a mid-fifth-century date for the walls, they can be conveniently set aside in seeking to establish their exact date. This is because their date turns ultimately on a single concrete fact: a fragmentary inscription over one of the towers of the east wall.

The significance of this inscription (*IG X.ii.1 43*) is due to its mention of the person responsible for providing the city with 'impregnable walls'—a certain Hormisdas. The top line, which probably contained an imperial dedication, is missing. The second line, however, reads: *τεί[χ]εῖν ἀρ[ρή]κτοις Ὁρμίδας ἐξέτελεσε τήνδε πόλ[ι]ν*. So, the key to the date of the walls is identification of the Hormisdas of this inscription. Tafrali considered that he was the commander of the Egyptian troops of Theodosius I in Thessalonika in 380, mentioned at Zosimus 4.30.¹ Following a suggestion of H. Koethe² made on the comparative observation of brickstamps, however, it has recently been argued by

¹ O. Tafrali, *Topographie de Thessalonique* (Paris 1913) 33–40.

² "Das Konstantinsmausoleum und verwandte Denkmäler," *JdI* 48 (1933) 197–98; "Aber könnte der Erbauer der Mauern nicht gerade so gut oder noch besser der 448/50 im Amt nachweisbare praefectus praetorio [198] orientis Hormisdas gewesen sein, da doch die beiden ältesten byzantinischen Mauerabschnitte, von denen einer die Hormisdasinschrift trägt, übereinstimmend Ziegelstempel aufweisen, die mit denen der Kirchenbauten des fünften Jahrhunderts, aber nicht mit älterem Material, zusammengehen?"

Michael Vickers that this Hormisdas is the same person as the known Praetorian Prefect of the East in 449 and 450.³ This identification has now been accepted.⁴ Vickers suggests that Hormisdas will have erected the walls as Praetorian Prefect of Illyricum, resident in Thessalonika, before his tenure of the Eastern prefecture.⁵ His argument is based primarily on assuming that a law addressed to Hormisdas which does not specify his exact prefecture (*Cod. Just.* 1.1.3, *ἐπάρχῳ πραιτωρίων*) and which is dated 16 February 448 was addressed to Hormisdas as Praetorian Prefect of Illyricum.⁶

There are several strong reasons why this cannot be so. In the first instance, the law is written in Greek. As a matter of fact, it is the very first extant law in Greek. Latin remained the language of law until the time of Justinian,⁷ except that in about 440 Greek began to replace Latin in the office of the Eastern prefecture only.⁸ Consequently, the date of *Cod. Just.* 1.1.3 (448) suggests that, as the first extant law in Greek, it was addressed to the Prefect of the East, especially since in

³ "The Date of the Walls of Thessalonika," *Istanbul Arkeoloji Müzeleri Yilligi* [hereafter *IAMY*] 15/16 (1969) 313–18; "Epilegomena to *IG X, II, 1*," *JHS* 93 (1973) 242–43; "Further Observations on the Chronology of the Walls of Thessaloniki," *Makedonika* 12 (1972) 228–33; "The Late Roman Walls of Thessalonika," *Roman Frontier Studies* 1969 (Cardiff 1974) 249–55.

⁴ Most recently by J. A. S. Evans, "The Walls of Thessalonika," *Byzantion* 47 (1977) 361–62. Evans demonstrates the continued existence of the hippodrome for chariot racing after the 440s. He could also have suggested that the riots of Blues and Greens in the city in the reign of Phocas (*Mirac. Dem.* 1.10 [PG 116, 1262]) probably occurred in the hippodrome as well rather than in the stadium (as suggested by M. Vickers, "The Hippodrome at Thessaloniki," *JRS* 62 [1972] 30). Since the hippodrome continued to function after the 440s, closer attention must be paid to the long straight marble blocks underlying the walls on both the west and the east side. If they are seats from the hippodrome, perhaps they were discarded and new seats constructed at some stage. Maybe seats are included among the 'inter cetera' of the remodelling of Cataphronius (*IG X.II.1* 41, with Vickers, *loc. cit.* 30–31). The possibility must also be considered that they are not seats from the hippodrome at all.

⁵ Vickers originally argued (*IAMY* [*supra* n.3] 316) that Hormisdas built the walls of Thessalonika as Praetorian Prefect of the East because "he would have had jurisdiction over Thessalonika"; later, when corrected by G. Gounaris ("*Παρατήρεις τινὲς ἐπὶ τῆς χρονολογίας τῶν τειχῶν τῆς Θεσσαλονίκης*," *Makedonika* 11 [1971] 319), he altered this view, conjecturing Hormisdas' previous tenure of the Illyrian prefecture.

⁶ *art. cit.* (*supra* n.3) *Makedonika* 229, "... which leaves open the possibility that he was PPO Illyrici at the time." Repeated at *JHS* 93 p.243 and *Roman Frontier Studies* 1969 p.253; stated as proven fact in "Sirmium or Thessaloniki? A Critical Examination of the St. Demetrius Legend," *BZ* 67 (1974) 338.

⁷ G. Dagron, "Aux origines de la civilisation byzantine: langue de culture et langue d'état," *RHist* 241 (1969) 44.

⁸ Lydus, *Mag.* 2.12, with Dagron, *art. cit.* (*supra* n.7) 41–42.

predominantly Latin-speaking Illyricum laws continued to be issued in Latin. Moreover, the first law directed to an Illyrian Prefect in Greek was not issued until 539 (*Nov.Just.* 162).

A second reason is that the failure to specify the prefecture of Hormisdas in *Cod.Just.* 1.1.3 does not necessarily mean that it has dropped out thereby leaving open the possibility that the law was addressed to 'Hormisdas Praetorian Prefect of Illyricum'. What should be noted is that *none* of the laws addressed to Hormisdas specifies his prefecture and that the failure to mention the precise prefecture in the laws of the *Codex Justinianus* is normally an indication that the prefect addressed was actually Praetorian Prefect of the East.⁹ The plain fact is that in the *Code* no Prefect of the East is styled anything other than simply 'pp.'. On the other hand, laws addressed to prefects other than the Prefect of the East normally do specify the prefecture. Thus we find 'pp. per Illyr.' (*Cod.Just.* 1.2.8 [424], 2.4.43 [500], 2.7.7 [439], 2.7.14 [469], 2.7.17 [474] etc.), 'pp. Gall.' (3.13.5 [397]) and 'pp. Afr.' (1.27.1 [534]). There can be no doubt that *Cod.Just.* 11.22.1 addressed to 'Hormisdae pp.' indicates that he was Praetorian Prefect of the East because it establishes the metropolitan status of Beirut; and we can be reasonably confident in assuming that the remaining laws were also directed to Hormisdas as Prefect of the East rather than of Illyricum.

Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that *Cod.Just.* 1.1.3 in particular was addressed to Hormisdas as Prefect of Illyricum; the law's content fits the context of the Eastern prefecture far better since it concerns the burning of Nestorian books. In 448 precisely the persecution and defence of Nestorius and Nestorian books was very much a live issue in the east. It would seem odd that in 448, when Eutyches was once again raising the question of Nestorius at the imperial court,¹⁰ a law reiterating the ban on Nestorian books should be directed to the Prefect of Illyricum, where Nestorianism was scarcely a problem,¹¹

⁹ The only exception to this rule is *Cod.Just.* 12.16.1 (415): *Urso pu. et Aureliano pp.Or. et Strategio pp. per Ill.* Surely this is to be explained by the fact that since a single law is addressed to three separate prefects some extra differentiation needed to be made. The laws to Hormisdas are *Cod.Just.* 1.1.3 (448), 5.17.8 (449), 5.14.8 (450), 6.52.1 (450), 11.22.1 (448–450).

¹⁰ Evagr. *HE* 1.9 with J. B. Bury, *A History of the Later Roman Empire* I (London 1923) 355. The ban on Nestorian books was originally set in motion in a law directed to the Prefect of Constantinople, Leontius, on 3 August 435 (*Cod.Theod.* 16.5.66).

¹¹ J. Zeiller, *Les origines chrétiennes dans les provinces danubiennes de l'empire romain* (Paris 1918) 356–57.

rather than to the Prefect of the East, within whose jurisdiction the controversy over Nestorius was being so vehemently played out.

Vickers' insistence on the 448 date is dependent, besides his interpretation of *Cod. Just.* 1.1.3, on brickstamps from the walls themselves. Byzantine brickstamps, including those at Thessalonika, are still largely a mystery to us, although some sensible suggestions have been advanced.¹² No one is certain about what they mean or how they are to be dated except where there is some indisputable indication stamped on them. Vickers suggests the interpretation proposed by V. and M. Soteriou, namely that the configuration $\Xi \text{ A}$ means ENT[IKTIONOC] A, that is 'in the first indiction'.¹³ Since 447/8 was a first indiction, this accords nicely, according to Vickers, "with the only objective dating device of the period that we have, namely the Hormisdas inscription."¹⁴ This is a doubtful way to proceed. As explained above, the inscription (taken in conjunction with *Cod. Just.* 1.1.3) hardly constitutes an 'objective dating device'. Furthermore, this explanation of $\Xi \text{ A}$ is fraught with difficulties since ENTIKTIONOC has itself to be inferred. In any case, if ENT A really does mean September 447–September 448, then what can ENT K and ENT T (found on some bricks) possibly mean in terms of indictions?

The implications of this interpretation are obvious. One is then forced to admit that ENT B stamps must mean that "Hormisdas was still in Thessaloniki during the second year of the indiction."¹⁵ This is contradicted, however, by *Cod. Just.* 1.1.3, which shows that Hormisdas was Prefect of the East on 16 February 448. In addition, even according to Vickers' own interpretation, Hormisdas cannot have been long in Thessalonika during the second indiction because he is attested as Prefect of the East on 9 January 449¹⁶ and was out of office

¹² C. Mango, "Byzantine Brickstamps," *AJA* 54 (1950) 19–27.

¹³ *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) *Makedonika* 229–30, *JHS* 243, and "Fifth Century Brickstamps from Thessaloniki," *BSA* 68 (1973) 292, following G. and M. Soteriou, *Ἡ Βασιλικὴ τοῦ Ἁγίου Δημητρίου Θεσσαλονίκης* (Athens 1952) 235.

¹⁴ *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.13) *BSA* 292.

¹⁵ *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.14).

¹⁶ *Cod. Just.* 5.17.8, misleadingly dated to 450 by Vickers, *opp.citt.* (*supra* n.3) *Makedonika* 229, *JHS* 243. The date of the law's subscription is unquestionable: *v. id. Jan. Protogene et Asterio cons.* Furthermore, Vickers' statement (*Makedonika* 229, *Roman Frontier Studies* 1969 255) that Hormisdas "is first referred to specifically as *p.p. Orientis* only in a law promulgated late in 449 or early in 450" is equally misleading, especially according to his own reasoning. The constitution cited (*Cod. Just.* 11.22.1) no more specifies Hormisdas' prefecture than does *Cod. Just.* 1.1.3 and, since it is not dated at all, can belong anywhere in the period 448–450.

completely by 9 April 449, when Salomon was Praetorian Prefect of Illyricum.¹⁷

It must be admitted that Vickers' interpretation of the brickstamps does not get us far. More importantly, it cannot be used to date the construction of the walls to precisely 447–449, especially in so far as it is compounded to the equally hypothetical date for Hormisdas. Nonetheless, it does not necessarily eliminate the possibility that the Hormisdas of IG X.ii.1 43 is the same person as the prefect of 448–450. It simply means that his tenure of the prefecture of Illyricum must precede 16 February 448 (*Cod. Just.* 1.1.3), and this makes good sense in the light of events in the 440s. This, however, is where Vickers' conclusions are hard to follow. On the one hand, he argues that the walls were built exactly in 447–449 because of the brickstamps¹⁸ and, on the other, he presumes that the building of the walls followed soon after the removal of the Illyrian prefecture from Sirmium to Thessalonika, that is about 442/3¹⁹—“at a time when the Huns were still pressing and before the peace treaty of 448.”²⁰ Further investigation shows that the date Vickers must stand by is 442/3.

In 441 the Huns crossed the Danube and launched a devastating invasion of northern Illyricum (Dacia), taking several important cities such as Viminacium and Singidunum²¹ as well as Sirmium, the capital of the Illyrian prefecture.²² It was in the wake of precisely this invasion that the prefect Apraemius and his entourage were forced to evacuate Sirmium and flee to Thessalonika, as we learn from a Novel of Justinian (*Nov. Just.* 11).²³ In 441 a peace treaty was arranged for a period

¹⁷ See the Syriac acts of the Second Council of Ephesus: J. Flemming, ed. *Akten der ephesinischen Synode vom Jahre 449*, transl. and notes by G. Hoffmaur (*AbhGött.* 15.1, Berlin 1917) 21 line 14. Since at this time Protogenes was Prefect of the East, Hormisdas' tenure of the Eastern prefecture must have been interrupted and only later resumed (O. Seeck, *Regesten der Kaiser und Päpste* [Stuttgart 1919] 424, cf. 140).

¹⁸ *op.cit.* (*supra* nn.3, 13) BSA 293, *JHS* 243; cf. *Makedonika* 230: “. . . it would have taken some years for the necessary finance to be raised and the work to begin, hence the delay in building the walls.”

¹⁹ *art.cit.* (*supra* n.6) BZ 338.

²⁰ *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) *Roman Frontier Studies* 1969 253–54.

²¹ Marcell.com. 441.1, Priscus fr.2 (*FHG* IV 73) with E. A. Thompson, *A History of Attila and the Huns* (Oxford 1948) 20ff, and O. J. Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns* (Berkeley 1973) 110.

²² A. Alföldi, *Der Untergang der Römerherrschaft in Pannonien II* (Berlin 1926) 96.

²³ *cum enim in antiquis temporibus Sirmii praefectura fuerat constituta ibique omne fuerat fastigium tam in civilibus quam in episcopalibus causis, postea autem Attilanis temporibus eiusdem locis devastatis Apraemius praefectus praetorio de Sirmiana civitate in Thessalonicam profugus*

of one year (Marcell.com. 441.3) to enable the Roman expedition in Sicily to return to bolster defences in Thrace and Illyricum (Theophanes A.M. 5942 [de Boor 102.19]). Upon the expiry of the one-year treaty the Huns again set about rampaging through Roman territory. This time, however, they turned their attention to the northeast of Illyricum and Thrace (Marcell.com. 442.2). Again a treaty was arranged and the Huns pacified, at least for the short term.²⁴

When the Illyrian prefect and his party arrived in haste in Thessalonika in 441, and particularly since the treaty with the Huns was only designed to last for one year, surely their paramount concern was to ensure the security of their new capital. That is to say, the most urgent task facing the prefect in 442/3 was the strengthening and reconstruction of the walls of the city along the lines of the old Hellenistic walls.²⁵ Thessalonika urgently required fortification in order to avoid the recent fate of Sirmium. Neither in 441 nor in 442 did the Huns reach Thessalonika nor, for that matter, anywhere in the vicinity. Yet there was no certainty that they would not soon be near Thessalonika. In view of the urgency of the situation it seems only logical to assume that the city walls were constructed immediately rather than to believe that the prefect and his staff planned the walls and patiently gathered bricks over a period of five years or so, only finally putting them up in 447–449. Given the Hun threat, we can be fairly confident in assuming that the walls of Thessalonika were built when they were most urgently needed—442/3. Moreover, there is evidence to confirm this assumption.

In 447 the restless Huns cut loose on the empire once again and subjected Thrace and parts of Illyricum to their most fierce plundering to date. Writing from the safety and perspective of Constantinople in the time of Justin I, the Illyrian Marcellinus described it as follows:

venerat (ed. Schoell-Kroll 94). Although this law is normally taken as incontrovertible proof that the headquarters of the praetorian prefect were set up in Thessalonika for the first time in 441, having been removed from somewhere else (usually thought to be Serdica) to Sirmium only after 424, it is possible that Thessalonika was the prefectural capital of Illyricum from 395 or so. This was the considered opinion of, among others, both Bury, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.10) 27, and E. Stein (“Untersuchungen zur spätrömischen Verwaltungsgeschichte,” *RhM* 74 [1925] 358). Yet there is no reason to disbelieve the statement that Apraemius was Prefect when the administration was removed from Sirmium in 441.

²⁴ Peace was restored in the Balkans by 21 August 442 when it was considered safe enough for Illyrian lawyers to resume work (*Cod. Just.* 2.7.9). For the uncertain chronology of these events, see Maenchen-Helfen, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.21) 110–17.

²⁵ M. Vickers, “Hellenistic Thessaloniki,” *JHS* 92 (1972) 167.

ingens bellum et priore maius per Attilam regem nostris inflictum paene totam Europam excisis invasisque civitatibus atque castellis conrasit (447.2). When the Huns launched this invasion from northern Thrace the *magister militum*, Arnigisclus, set out from Marcianople to oppose them but was killed near the river Vit when he lost his mount (Marcell. com. 447.5, Jord. *Rom.* 231). Marcianople was captured and the Huns moved deeper into Thrace (*Chron.Pasch.* 586). They presumably followed the Roman roads and advanced to Arcadiople by way of Mesembria. Arcadiople was taken and many other towns in Europe, but Heraclea was spared (Theophanes A.M. 5942 [de Boor 102.21f]). The widespread panic and desolation which Marcellinus reports for Europe is echoed by the monk Callinicus, who describes how many citizens of Constantinople wanted to flee across the Bosphorus and how some monks preferred to desert the imperial capital for Jerusalem (Call. *V.Hyp.* 52.3–9). The newly repaired walls of Constantinople deterred the Huns. Still, monasteries were sacked and their occupants put to the sword (*V.Hyp.* 53.6–7). One holy man who lived through it all was prompted to comment: “they have ravaged Thrace so well that it has not been reclaimed nor is it any longer what it once used to be” (*V.Hyp.* 53.8).

From Constantinople Attila’s Huns turned west and advanced along the Egnatian way towards Thessalonika, galloped through Macedonia and reached Thermopylae (Marcell.com. 447.4). There is not the slightest hint in our sources that Thessalonika was even attacked, let alone taken, in 447. Yet the Huns can scarcely have failed to pass close to Thessalonika *en route* from Constantinople to Thermopylae. This fact strongly suggests that the Huns, with their limited ability at besieging cities (*cf.* Procop. *Aed.* 4.2.23, 3.21–22), were deterred by the walls of Thessalonika. They were not averse to capturing key Roman towns (witness Sirmium and Singidunum in 441) and were not ones to forego such an opportunity if a city was ill-fortified or undermanned. Thessalonika, like Constantinople, which they did attack in 447, and Sirmium, captured in 441, was a prime target for the loot-hungry barbarians.

The decisive evidence in support of the assumptions that the Huns bypassed Thessalonika in 447 is an observation by the ever informative Priscus. When he went with Maximinus on his famous embassy to Attila in 449, he noticed that the Huns had among their captives some particularly scruffy ones from the coastal area of Illyricum, ἀπὸ τῆς

Ἰλλυρίδος παράλον (fr.8, FHG IV 86). Since the Huns did not reach further west than Thermopylae in 447, this can only mean the region of the Chalcidice and the vicinity of Thessalonika. In this event, it is difficult to believe that they would have forsaken an attack on Thessalonika itself if the walls were not yet rebuilt. That we hear not a word of it suggests that the walls were already constructed and the Huns realized they were unlikely to overcome them by force or, if they did attack them, that they were not able to breach the formidable new defences of the city.

Sheer probability and a stray comment of Priscus combine to suggest that the walls of Thessalonika were constructed before the Hun invasion of 447. If that is so, and if Koethe's original suggestion²⁶ that the Hormisdas responsible for them was the Eastern Prefect of 448–450 is correct, it means that Hormisdas must have been in Thessalonika in 442/3.

Finally, although it is possible that the Hormisdas of Thessalonika was not Praetorian Prefect of Illyricum at the time he built the walls, there is good reason to suspect he was. Quite apart from the fact that after 441 it is difficult to see who else other than the prefect would take the credit for such a venture in the prefectural capital, it is worth emphasising the general point that in the late empire the construction of walls became increasingly the responsibility of the local imperial governor,²⁷ the prefect of course in this case. It follows, therefore, that Hormisdas constructed the walls of Thessalonika in 442/3 when he was resident there as Praetorian Prefect of Illyricum. There is room for him in the *fasti* between Apraemius in 441 (*Nov. Just.* 11) and Theodorus, first attested as prefect on 9 November 444 (*Nov. Theod.* 26). It was presumably the same Hormisdas who later became Prefect of the East.

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²⁶ *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.2).

²⁷ A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* (Oxford 1964) 758.