

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

*Ronald C. McCail*

IN a brilliant note in his *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, Ernest Stein<sup>1</sup> 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*<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> He continues (2.15 *init.*) as follows:

<sup>1</sup> II (Paris-Brussels-Amsterdam 1949) 757 n.5.

<sup>2</sup> 2.15–17, pp.203ff Dindorf.

<sup>3</sup> "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 *in.* introduit son récit du séisme par les mots 'Υπό δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν χρόνον, θέρους ὥρα, 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).

<sup>4</sup> Lists of earthquakes in the Byzantine world have been compiled most recently by G. 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.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Stein *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) II.816f, 609f.

Ἵπὸ δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν χρόνον θέρους ὥρα ἔσεισε μέγα ἔν τε Βυζαντίῳ καὶ πολλαχοῦ τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς, ὡς καὶ πόλεις συχνὰς νησιωτικὰς τε καὶ ἡπειρώτιδας ἀθρόον ἀνατραπήναι καὶ ἄρδην τοὺς οἰκήτορας διαφθεῖραι.

Agathias uses ὑπό in similar temporal expressions elsewhere, once with exactness (2.16 ὑπὸ τὸν αὐτὸν χρόνον, *vide infra*), once more vaguely (2.17 ὑπὸ δὲ τοὺς Αὐγούστου 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.<sup>6</sup> Hence ὑπό 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.<sup>7</sup> In his second sentence he continues:

Βηρυτὸς γοῦν ἢ καλλίστη, τὸ Φοινίκων τέως ἐγκαλλώπισμα, τότε δὴ ἀπηγλαίσθη ἅπασα καὶ κατέρριπτο τὰ κλεινὰ ἐκεῖνα καὶ περιάλητα τῆς οἰκοδομίας δαιδάλματα, ὡς μηδὲν ὀτιοῦν σχεδὸν ποῦ 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.<sup>8</sup> Agathias is silent about the withdrawal of the

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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) 199,9ff, 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.

<sup>8</sup> See “Antonius of Placentia” 1–2, ed. P. Geyer in CSEL 39 (Vienna 1898) p.159.

sea and the subsequent tidal wave which cast vessels on to dry land,<sup>9</sup> perhaps because he was reluctant to include in his work an event which to contemporary eyes must have partaken of the miraculous.<sup>10</sup>

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  
ἰδρυμένη ποταμῷ, καὶ ταῦτα οὐκ εἰωθὸς σείεσθαι τὸ χάριον,  
ξυναίσθησις τις τοῦ κλόνου ἐλαχίστη μὲν καὶ ἀφαιροτάτη καὶ  
οὐ πάμπαν ἀρίδης, γέγονε δὲ ὁμῶς, 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.<sup>11</sup> After a quasi-scientific consideration of why Egypt had till that time been free of earthquakes he continues (2.16 *init.*):

Κατ' ἐκεῖνο γὰρ τοῦ καιροῦ καὶ ἡ Κῶς ἡ νῆσος ἡ πρὸς τῷ  
τέρματι τοῦ Αἰγαίου κειμένη, ἐλάχιστόν τι μέρος αὐτῆς ἐσέσωστο,  
ἡ δὲ ἄλλη ἅπασα ἐπεπτώκει, ποικίλα τε αὐτῇ καὶ ἀνήκουστα  
προσεγένετο πάθη, κτλ.

Agathias goes on to relate how the main town on the island of Cos (*cf.* οἱ ἄστοί, τὸ ἄστυ, τῇ πόλει) was destroyed by a tidal wave. The phrase *κατ' ἐκεῖνο τοῦ καιροῦ* is usually employed by Agathias to denote some well-defined time.<sup>12</sup> Agathias' own linguistic usage, therefore, implies that Cos was destroyed by a tidal wave at the same time as Berytus.

<sup>9</sup> This last detail only in Nicephorus Uranus, *Vita Sym. Iun.* in Migne, PG 86.2 (1865) 3085f. The tidal-wave at Whittier, Alaska in 1964, beached a small steamer and carried heavy objects inland, *cf.* U.S. Dept. of the Interior, *Geological Survey Professional Paper 542-B* pp.B16ff, with photograph. *Cf.* also the general remarks of Ambraseys, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 905.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> ἐμοὶ δὲ γε καὶ αὐτῷ, ἐτύγχανον γὰρ αὐτοῦ διατρίβων παιδείας ἔνεκα τῆς πρὸ τῶν νόμων, δεδιέναι προσῆει, κτλ, reading with Niebuhr *πρὸ* for the *πρὸς* 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 Omnem* 7.

<sup>12</sup> *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.)<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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' time),<sup>15</sup> and the starting-age could be as low as eleven or twelve.<sup>16</sup> But sixteen or thereabouts seems to have been a frequent starting-age for higher education of all types;<sup>17</sup> 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,<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

To show that such disasters are not peculiar to his own epoch (2.17;

<sup>13</sup> Procop. *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.6).

<sup>14</sup> ἐμοὶ γοῦν ἐκ τῆς Ἀλεξάνδρου ὑπὸ τὸν αὐτὸν χρόνον κατὰ τὸ Βυζάντιον ἀνακομιζομένῳ, καὶ ἐν τῇδε τῇ νήσῳ, οὕτω παρασχόν, ἐν παράπλῳ γὰρ κείται, κατάραντι, οἰκτρὸν τι πέφηνεν θέαμα καὶ ὁποῖον οὐκ ἂν ἀποχρώντως ὑπογράψοι ὁ λόγος, κτλ (2.16).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. P. Petit, *Les étudiants de Libanius* (Paris 1957) 63ff.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* 139ff.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* 140f; P. Collinet, *Études historiques sur le Droit de Justinien II* (Paris 1925) 112; later Byzantine examples in F. Fuchs, *Die höheren Schulen von Konstantinopel im Mittelalter* (*ByzArch* 8, 1926) 28, 46; Eustorgius in *Anth.Pal.* 7.589 (Agathias) had been a law-student at seventeen.

<sup>18</sup> As his own words might seem to imply, 205,5ff Dindorf: ἀλλὰ γὰρ καὶ ὁ τι λόγιμον ἐν τῇ πόλει, ἐδείκναιον καὶ οἶδε, οὔτι που, οἶμαι, τὸ ἤδη παρωχηκός, ἀλλ' ὅτι αὐτοῖς καὶ ἐσαῦθις ταῦτό τοῦτο ξυμβήσεσθαι οὐκ ἀπὸ τρόπου ἐδόκει.

<sup>19</sup> Justinian perpetuated the constitution of Diocletian and Maximian exempting certain Arabian law students from *munera* until twenty-five, *Cod.Justin.* 10.50(49).1, but omitted *Cod.Theodos.* 14.9.1 of Valentinian (A.D. 370, cf. *Cod.Justin.* 11.19(18), which had fixed the upward age-limit for higher education at twenty; perhaps Valentinian's ordinance had never been effective in the Eastern Empire, where the study of rhetoric and philosophy as a preliminary to law was more firmly rooted than in the West, cf. Petit, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.15) 139, 143 n.33; F. Schemmel, *PhilWoch* 43 (1923) 238. An observation of Ulpian on the treat-

cf. 2.16 *fin.*), Agathias recounts the earthquake at Tralles ὑπὸ τοῦς Ἀυγούστου καίσαρος χρόνους.<sup>20</sup> Agathias is using the *Patria* of Tralles,<sup>21</sup> and is correct in his assertion that Augustus was in Cantabria when the Trallean envoy Chaeremon sought him.<sup>22</sup> 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' ἐκεῖνο τοῦ καιροῦ.<sup>23</sup> 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 ἕκαστα. 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).<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> His new viewpoint allows him to refer to the Five Years' Truce of 551 as ὀλίγω ἔμπροσθεν (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.<sup>26</sup> It is very likely that these deficiencies had

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ment of wards (*Dig.* 27.2.3.5) assumes an upward age-limit of twenty for higher education, but, as the examples in Petit *loc.cit.* demonstrate, this was not effective in the fourth century, and it is impossible to say whether Justinian intended it to have legal force.

<sup>20</sup> 27 B.C., see Hieronym. *Chron.* p.164 Helm; Strabo 12.8.18.

<sup>21</sup> τὰτα δὲ οὕτω ξυνεχθῆναι δηλοῖ μὲν που καὶ ἡ πάτριος τοῦ ἄστεος ἱστορία, 208,25 Dindorf.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *CAH* (Cambridge 1934) 10, 343.

<sup>23</sup> 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' ἐκεῖνο τοῦ καιροῦ has a broad application here.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Stein *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) II.513.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Stein II.493f, 502, 504ff.

<sup>26</sup> 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,<sup>27</sup> he adopts a defensive tone, complaining of lack of time to gather and examine material (236, 12ff Dindorf):

ἡ γάρ μοι ξυγγραφή, τοῦτο δὴ τὸ μέγιστόν τε καὶ σεμνότατον ἔργον καὶ πάσης ἀσχολίας ὑπέρτερον, εἶποι ἂν ἡ λύρα ἢ Βοιωτία, ὁδοῦ τε καὶ βίου πάρεργον γίγνεται καὶ οὐκ ἔνεστί μοι ὡς ἥδιστα ἐμβιῶναι τοῖς ποθουμένοις. δέον γὰρ τοὺς πάλαι σοφοὺς σχολαίτερον ἀναλέγεσθαι μιμήσεως ἕκατι, ἅπαντά τε τὰ ἕκασταχοῦ ξυμφερόμενα γνωματεύειν ἐς τὸ ἀκριβὲς καὶ ἀναπυθάνεσθαι, ἀνειμένον τε ἀμφὶ ταῦτα ἔχειν τὸν νοῦν καὶ ἐλεύθερον, ἀλλ' ἔγωγε ἥμενος ἐν τῇ βασιλείῳ στοᾶ βιβλίδια πολλὰ δικῶν ἀνάπλεα καὶ πραγμάτων ἐξ ἑωθινοῦ μέχρι καὶ ἐς ἥλιον καταδύντα ἐκμελετῶ καὶ ἀνελίττω . . . ,

and especially 237, 6ff:

πλὴν ἀλλ' οὐδ' ὡς ἀνήσω τοῦμόν οὐδὲ ἀποπαύσομαι ἔστ' ἂν ὁ ἔρωσ με ἄγη, εἰ καὶ μοί τις νεμεσήσειεν ὡς ὑπερτέρων ἐφιεμένῳ καὶ τὸ λεγόμενον ἐν πίθῳ φιλεργοῦντι τὴν κεραμείαν. εἰ γὰρ τῷ καὶ δόξειεν εἶναι τὰμὰ νόθα γε ὡς ἀληθῶς καὶ ἀνεμιαῖα καὶ οἷα ψυχῆς ἐς πλεῖστα μεριζομένης κυήματα, ἀλλ' ἐμαυτὸν γοῦν ἴσως ἀρέσκοιμι ἂν, καθάπερ τῶν ἄδόντων οἱ ἀμουσότατοι.

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

<sup>27</sup> O. Veh, *Der Geschichtsschreiber Agathias von Myrina* 20 (Wiss. Beilage zum Jahresb. Gymn. Bayreuth 1952/53), claims to detect a pause in composition between Books II and III.

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.

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

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