

When Did Synesius Become Bishop of Ptolemais?

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SHORTLY AFTER his consecration as bishop of Ptolemais, Synesius wrote to the priest Petrus requesting him to publicise the exact date of the approaching Easter (*Ep.* 13). The terms in which Synesius writes make it clear that this is the first Easter whose date he has had the duty of announcing. Moreover, since the date of Easter has been fixed as 19 Pharmouthi (*i.e.*, 14 April), the year must be either 407 or 412.¹ It follows that Synesius became bishop of Ptolemais either not long before Easter 407 or not long before Easter 412. In his classic study of the chronology of Synesius' career, Otto Seeck opted for the earlier date;² but C. Lacombrade, amplifying the arguments of G. Grützmacher, seems to have convinced all recent scholars that Synesius was consecrated bishop during 411.³ Since the date of Synesius' departure from Constantinople is relevant to that of his consecration, and an earlier article has argued that Synesius left Constantinople in 400 rather than in 402 (as Seeck and Lacombrade assumed),⁴ the issue deserves to be reopened. The three complex arguments that Lacombrade advanced in favour of 411 were based on the need to accommodate Synesius' attested activities, travels, and writings between his return from Constantinople and his consecration as bishop. Once the underpinning of a return in 402 has been removed, the explicit arguments need to stand on their own merits.

The first of Lacombrade's arguments concerns Roman governors and the depredation of the Pentapolis by raiders from the desert. The "Address spoken on the occasion of the great barbarian raid, when Gennadius was governor and Innocentius *dux*" makes two chronologically significant statements: Synesius is speaking in the seventh

¹ See, *e.g.*, the table in E. Schwartz, *Christliche und jüdische Ostertafeln* (*AbhGöttingen* N. F. 8.6 [1905]) 186.

² "Studien zu Synesios," *Philologus* 52 (1894) 442–83, at 460ff.

³ C. Lacombrade, *Synésios de Cyrène, Hellène et Chrétien* (Paris 1951) 109ff, 249ff; *cf.* G. Grützmacher, *Synesios von Kyrene* (Leipzig 1913) 131 n.2.

⁴ "Synesius in Constantinople," *GRBS* 27 (1986) 93–112.

year of the province's tribulation (299_D), and Innocentius replaced Anysius, who had been *dux* for a year (300_A). Lacombrade argued that hostilities with the nomads began in January 405: hence, since Anysius was *dux* while Andronicus was governor (*Ep.* 77), and Andronicus arrived as governor at the same time as Synesius became bishop (*Epp.* 41 [57], 72), Synesius' consecration belongs to 411. The weak link in the argument is the assertion that marauding began in January 405: it is true that in a letter to his brother, written in January 405, Synesius speaks bitterly of a violent and apparently sudden raid (*Ep.* 132; *cf.* 133), but it is not clear that this marked the first outbreak of trouble.

The second argument concerns a letter to one Cyrillus, whose rank is not stated explicitly (*Ep.* 12):

Go, brother Cyrillus, to your mother the church, from which you were not cut off but separated for a time, which is prescribed for the seriousness of your offences. I think that you know clearly that our common father of holy memory would have done this long ago, if the fatal hour had not come first: for to make punishment a suitable length is after all a characteristic of a resolve that promises pardon from the start. Consider then that that sacred priest himself has granted you your return, and approach God with a soul become pure from suffering and enjoying forgetfulness of misfortune. But hold in all happy memory that holy and god-loving old man who appointed you leader of a parish (*πρόεδρον δήμου*).⁵ This too will not be displeasing to you in any way.

Lacombrade detected an allusion to the death of Theophilus, which occurred on 15 October 412 (Soc. *HE* 7.7.1): he held that, since the metropolitan Synesius refers to a dead man who is his ecclesiastical superior and who can be said to appoint bishops in Pentapolis, this man must be the bishop of Alexandria, and he saw a pun on the name of the recently deceased bishop in Synesius' description of him as a "god-loving old man" (*θεοφιλή πρεσβύτην*). The letter would thus be the latest extant of Synesius, who must (Lacombrade argued) have died in the winter of 412/3, since there is no trace of any correspondence with Cyril, the successor of Theophilus as patriarch of Alexandria. The deduction appears to be most

⁵ The word *πρόεδρος* more naturally suggests a bishop (so G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* [Oxford 1961] 1145 s.v.), but *προεδρία* is clearly used to mean 'priesthood' in [Bas.] *Comm. in Is.* 103 (Migne, *PG* 30.285). I suspect that *δήμος* does not have its usual sense of 'people', but is an Atticism with the meaning 'district, township, village'.

attractive. Yet Lacombrade's interpretation cannot be sustained. It presupposes, *ex hypothesi*, that Synesius' correspondent is a bishop. But the penalty to which Synesius alludes is excommunication: the letter puts an end to Cyrillus' exclusion from the church, either by lifting the ban upon him or by shortening its originally prescribed duration. There is no hint that he has lost and may regain a bishop's see, for such decisions were the prerogative of church councils, not of metropolitan bishops. Since Cyrillus is to enter the church again after a period of penitence, Synesius is surely writing to a priest of Ptolemais, whom his recently deceased predecessor had punished for wrongdoing.⁶

The third of Lacombrade's arguments also depends on the interpretation of a letter, this time to Theophilus during his lifetime (*Ep.* 67 [66]). Synesius writes on behalf of Alexander, a decurion of Cyrene who became a monk when very young. He was ordained deacon, then priest, and went to court, where he met and became a supporter of John Chrysostom, the bishop of Constantinople, who consecrated him bishop of Basilinopolis in Bithynia.⁷ Alexander lost his see when the Synod of the Oak deposed John and his supporters (autumn 403). Subsequently, at the urging of Theophilus, unity was restored and the deposed bishops were allowed to return to their sees. Alexander, however, is, with Synesius, shunned as a pariah by the bishop's congregation, even though the third year has arrived since the amnesty and reconciliation. Synesius, embarrassed at the situation and still in his first year as bishop, writes to ask whether Alexander is to be treated as a bishop or not. John is now dead, and Theophilus had written to the bishop of Constantinople on behalf of the exiles, apparently before the reconciliation.

Lacombrade puts the amnesty (which happens to be otherwise unattested) in 408/9, and adduces the letter as confirmation that Synesius became bishop in 411.⁸ However, the most plausible historical context for the amnesty is in the period immediately after the death of Eudoxia, John's implacable enemy, on 6 October 404 (*Chr. min.* 2.68).⁹ Moreover, Synesius refers to John in a way that suggests

⁶ So, rightly and firmly, Seeck (*supra* n.2) 462.

⁷ A. Garzya, ed., *Synesii Cyrenensis epistolae* (Rome 1979) 122.2, prints τῆς Βιθυνῶν Βασινουπόλεως and glosses "episc(opus) Basinopolitanus" without registering any variant or conjecture for the otherwise unknown city: read Βασιλινουπόλεως.

⁸ *Supra* n.3: 210f. His *Tableau synoptique* (313f), however, has 406.

⁹ O. Seeck, *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt* V (Berlin 1913) 373, 585f; J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* I² (London 1923) 159 n.2; K. G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses* (Berkeley 1982) 87.

that he has only recently received news of his death, which occurred on 14 September 407 (Soc. *HE* 6.21.4): Ἰωάννη τῷ μακαρίτῃ συστάς (τιμάσθω γὰρ παρ' ἡμῶν ἡ μνήμη τοῦ τελευτήσαντος, ὅτι πάντα δυσμένεια τῷ βίῳ συναποτίθεται) Further, there is something odd about the description of the bishop of Constantinople to whom Theophilus wrote: πρὸς τὸν μακάριον, ἐμοὶ δοκεῖν, Ἀττικὸν ἔγραφε. Why the uncertainty? and why is the bishop “blessed”? Atticus was bishop of Constantinople from early 406 to 10 October 425 (Soc. *HE* 6.20.2, 7.25.21), and normal contemporary usage confined the epithets μακάριος and μακαρίτης to the dead.¹⁰ Seeck construed the uncertainty as showing that Synesius did not know whether Theophilus wrote to Atticus or to his predecessor Arsacius, who died on 11 November 405 (*HE* 6.20.1).¹¹ It may rather be the case that Ἀττικόν is a mistake for Ἀρσάκιον: Synesius was uncertain, not to which bishop of Constantinople Theophilus wrote, but of the name of the current bishop’s predecessor. Either he guessed, and guessed wrongly, that Atticus’ predecessor was also called Atticus, or the name is a simple *lapsus calami*. The following chronology may thus be proposed:

405	letter of Theophilus to Arsacius
late 405	amnesty for the supporters of John Chrysostom
406	election of Synesius as bishop of Ptolemais and, after a delay of six months, consecration
early 407	<i>Ep.</i> 13 (to Petrus on the date of Easter)
14 Sept. 407	death of John
winter 407/8	<i>Ep.</i> 67 [66] (to Theophilus on behalf of Alexander)

The date of Synesius’ consecration as bishop of Ptolemais cannot be regarded as certain. The arguments in favour of 411 are, to be sure, not so conclusive as they seem. Nevertheless, the principal positive argument in favour of 406 derives from historical plausibility, not from any compelling deduction of a precise or technical nature, and it requires the hypothesis that a proper name in the text of Synesius is erroneous. However, a chance exists that a papyrus or an inscription may settle the question definitively by supplying an exact

¹⁰ L. Dinneen, *Titles of Address in Christian Greek Epistolography to A.D. 527* (= *Patristic Studies* 18 [Washington, D.C., 1929]) 81ff. She cites the passage under discussion as the only example of μακάριος applied to the living (except in the phrase ὦ μακάριε) after Athanasius.

¹¹ Seeck (*supra* n.2) 461.

date for one of the governors or *duces* with whom Synesius dealt as bishop.¹²

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¹² *Viz.*, the governors Gennadius (*Ep.* 73; *Catastasis* I), Andronicus (*Epp.* 41 [57], 42 [58], 72f, 77, 79, 90), and Cleodnius (*Ep.* 39 [42]), and the *duces* Anysius (*Epp.* 6, 14, 37, 77f, 94; *Cat.* I), Innocentius (*Cat.* I), and Marcellinus (*Ep.* 62). For none of these men does *PLRE* II (1980) register any evidence outside Synesius. On Synesius as bishop and the province, C. H. Coster, "Synesius, a 'Curialis' in the Time of the Emperor Arcadius," *Byzantion* 15 (1940-41) 10-38, reprinted in his *Late Roman Studies* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1968) 145-82; J. Vogt, "Synesios gegen Andronikos: Der philosophische Bischof in der Krisis," in *Adel und Kirche, G. Tellenbach zum 65. Geburtstag* (Freiburg 1968) 15-25; R. G. Goodchild, "Synesius of Cyrene: Bishop of Ptolemais," *Libyan Studies*, ed. J. Reynolds (London 1976) 239-54; W. Liebeschuetz, "Synesius and Municipal Politics of Cyrenaica in the 5th Century A.D.," *Byzantion* 55 (1985) 146-64.

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