

The Legend of Constantine V as Dragon-Slayer

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ANY ACCOUNT of the Byzantine iconoclastic movement of the eighth and ninth centuries must depend, for the most part, upon evidence drawn from the hostile iconophile sources; this is in particular true when one undertakes a study of the great iconoclastic emperors of the eighth century, Leo III (717–741) and Constantine V (741–775). Fortunately some material, both of a historical and of a more legendary sort, which can be used to complement and to correct the information obtained from the Byzantine chronicles and saints' lives, is found in oriental sources which were composed and transmitted outside the immediate sphere of influence of the Byzantine iconophile tradition.¹ Though for information about this period mediaeval Latin historiography mostly depends upon Anastasius Bibliothecarius' translation of the *Chronographia* of Theophanes Confessor, there is also some Latin material of like independent value.² In this paper the literary affinities of such a text, a curious legend favorable to Constantine V, which is preserved only in a minor Latin source, will be investigated.

The late ninth-century *Gesta episcoporum Neapolitanorum*, extant in a single manuscript, *Vaticanus latinus* 5007,³ mentions, as an excursus in the entry pertaining to the bishop Calvus (750–762), the single-handed combat of the heroic Constantine with a lion and with a

¹ See the comments on this point in my article, "Notes on Byzantine Iconoclasm in the Eighth Century," *Byzantion* 44 (1974) 23–27.

² For Latin source material pertaining to the reign of Leo see my monograph, *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Leo III, with Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources* (Louvain 1973) 75, 186–87.

³ Ed. G. Waitz in *Scriptores rerum langobardicarum et italicarum saec. VI–IX* (Hannover 1878), part of the series *Monumenta Germaniae historica*; for another edition see B. Capasso, *Monumenta ad Neapolitani ducatus historiam pertinentia* I (Naples 1881). The most recent discussion of the codex, with some attention to the material here discussed, is P. Bertolini, "La chiesa di Napoli durante la crisi iconoclasta. Appunti sul codice Vaticano Latino 5007," in *Studi sul medioevo cristiano offerti a Raffaello Morghen* I (Rome 1974) 101–27. See also H. Achelis, "Die Bischofchronik von Neapel (von Johannes Diaconus u.a.)," *AbhLeipzig* 40.4 (Leipzig 1930).

destructive dragon, describing in detail the stratagem employed by Constantine against the monster. The text is as follows: *Hunc aiunt Constantinum robustiorem fuisse virum, qui leonem ferocissimam bestiam pugnando occidit et draconi se opposuit et ipsum interemit. Nam dum quadam aquaeductum sua magnitudine detineret et multos fetore suo perimeret nullumque alium consilium repperiret, semet ipsum pro omnibus Constantinus periculo dedit, statuens semet ipsum cum dracone conflicturus. Factaque sibi loricam falcatam, quem novaculis acutissimis ex omni parte munivit, atque ad locum, ubi ille teterrimus draco quiescebat, devenit. Nihil cunctatus, relictos suos, ad eum solus introiit. . .*⁴ The text here breaks off, because of the loss of a folio from the manuscript.⁵ But though we are deprived of the rest of the story, Constantine was apparently successful in his struggle, since the text then proceeds to recount an episode from the civil war between the emperor and his brother-in-law Artavasdus.⁶

Now, it is clear that we are dealing with material deeply rooted in a tradition of folklore. The Herculean slaying of a lion or several lions⁷ needs no further comment here. The fight of the hero with a dragon is of course also an extremely widespread theme.⁸ It has been conjectured that the text reflects an 'epic' tradition about Constantine, as this was perpetuated in popular songs, *tragoudia*.⁹ Whatever the immediate source of the story (about which, as can be expected, the iconophile writers are silent), the traditional folkloristic elements are toned down: the monster guards an aqueduct, not a spring or a well;

⁴ Ed. Waitz, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 422–23. The text was drawn to the attention of N. Adontz, apparently verbally, by the eminent historian of late antiquity Ernst Stein: "Légendes de Maurice et de Constantin V," *Annuaire de l'institut de philologie et d'histoire orientales* 2 (1934) 10; the article is reprinted in Adontz's *Etudes arméno-byzantines* (Lisbon 1965). This Latin and related Armenian material are noted in my recent monograph *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Constantine V, with Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources* (Louvain 1977) 176–78. Bertolini, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 114–16, is apparently unaware of Adontz's work.

⁵ After the folio now numbered 94. Adontz, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 11, thinks that perhaps the loss of "ce feuillet épique" is due to the action of some iconophile reader incensed at the favorable treatment accorded to the impious Constantine.

⁶ Ed. Waitz p.423, lines 10–16. On the rebellion of Artavasdus see Gero, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 14–22.

⁷ So some Armenian sources, which by contrast do not mention the dragon; Gero, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 176–77.

⁸ See S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* I (Bloomington 1955) 354, motif no. B.11.11 ("Fight with dragon").

⁹ So R. Goossens in his *compte rendu* of Adontz's article, *Byzantion* 9 (1934) 419.

there is no mention of any mandatory human sacrifice, and in particular there is no hint that the hero came to the rescue of a fair maiden as some latter-day Saint George.¹⁰ It is not clear whether the story presented the hero as being swallowed entirely or only in part by the monster before being subsequently spewed forth. But surely we are dealing with some variant of the 'attack from the inside' stratagem, well documented in folklore and legend;¹¹ the most familiar instance perhaps is Hercules' being swallowed by the aquatic monster (κῆτος) which menaced Hesione and his hacking his way out after three days.¹²

Roger Goossens, the one scholar who has investigated the affinities of the Constantine legend, argues for an eastern origin of the precise stratagem in question.¹³ Though he refers to some classical texts in which a smaller animal avoids being swallowed by a larger predator by holding crosswise a stick or a reed in its mouth,¹⁴ Goossens maintains that the nearest parallel is found in Marco Polo's account of how giant, supposedly two-footed serpents (probably crocodiles!) are hunted in the Chinese province of Carajan.¹⁵ The text in question runs as follows: "Now the huntsmen. . . plant a stake deep in the ground and fix on the head of this a sharp blade of steel made like a razor or a lance-point, and then they cover the whole with sand so that the serpent cannot see it. Indeed the huntsman plants several such stakes and blades on the track. On coming to the spot the beast strikes against the iron blade with such force that it enters his breast and rives

¹⁰ It should perhaps be noted that the influence of the St George legend cannot be supposed as a matter of course, since the slaying of the dragon is first attested in XII-century versions of the saint's exploits. See J. B. Aufhauser, *Das Drachenwunder des heiligen Georg* (Leipzig 1911) 237.

¹¹ See the material collected in E. S. Hartland, *The Legend of Perseus III* (London 1896) 14–16.

¹² On this tale see A. Lesky, *Thalatta. Der Weg der Griechen zum Meer* (Vienna 1947) 140.

¹³ "A propos de la légende du Constantin V," *Annuaire de l'institut de philologie et d'histoire orientales* 3 (1935) 157–60. Bertolini does not know Goossens' study and merely points to Eusebius' account of the depiction of Constantine the Great slaying a dragon in the *Vita Constantini*, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 115 n.53, citing the *Vita*, inexplicably, in the Latin translation of the *Patrologia Graeca*.

¹⁴ Aelian's account of the water-snakes and the frogs of the Nile, *VH* 1.3; and Phaedrus' tale of the snake and the lizard, *App.* 25 (ed. B. Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus* [Cambridge (Mass.) and London 1965] 406–08). Goossens (*op.cit.* [*supra* n.9]) also refers to the third voyage of Sindbad; the story in question tells how Sindbad was able to prevent a huge serpent from devouring him by tying long pieces of wood onto his body (transl. R. F. Burton, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night IV* [New York 1934] 2038).

¹⁵ Goossens, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.13) 158.

him up to the navel so that he dies on the spot.”¹⁶ Now, even if one accepts Goossens’ contention that the thirteenth-century traveler faithfully reproduces ancient oriental tradition, the relevance to the Constantine story is, to my mind, not at all obvious.

There is, by contrast, a close parallel which was overlooked by Goossens. This is found in Pausanias’ account of Menestratus’ sacrifice of himself in place of his lover Cleostratus, upon whom the lot fell to be surrendered to the dragon: ἐπὶ δὲ Κλεοστράτῳ λαχόντι τὸν ἔραστην αὐτοῦ Μενέστρατον λέγουσιν ἐπιτεχνήσασθαι. χαλκοῦν θώρακα ἐποιήσατο ἔχοντα ἐπὶ ἐκάστη τῶν φολίδων ἄγκιστρον ἐς τὸ ἄνω νεῦον τοῦτον τὸν θώρακα ἐνδὺς παρέδωκε τῷ δράκοντι ἐκουσίως αὐτόν, παραδοὺς δὲ ἀπολείψαι τε αὐτὸς καὶ ἀπολεῖν ἔμελλε τὸ θηρίον.¹⁷

Though as we have seen, Constantine, unlike Menestratus, escapes from the monster alive, Pausanias’ description of the armor, each plate of which is provided with a hook, is very close indeed to the *lorica falcata* with its sharp spikes. The story from Pausanias is the only ancient account, to my knowledge, of such a stratagem being used to destroy the monster in a *theriomachia*;¹⁸ we are clearly not

¹⁶ Transl. H. Yule, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*² II (London 1921) 77; critical edition of the original Franco-Italian text by L. F. Benedetto, *Marco Polo, Il milione* (Florence 1928) 116–17. See also A. C. Moule/P. Pelliot, *Marco Polo, The Description of the World* I (London 1938) 278–79. Cf. L. Olschki, *Marco Polo’s Asia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1960) 429.

¹⁷ Paus. 9.26.3. J. G. Frazer’s commentary provides a long but by no means complete listing of dragon-slaying stories: *Pausanias’s Description of Greece* V (London 1898) 143–45. There is only one other parallel, in a Scottish folk story from Galloway which tells about a dragon which had the nasty habit of feeding on newly buried corpses. A smith constructed an armor with retractable spikes, managed to get swallowed by the dragon, and then killed the monster by rolling about inside: summarized by E. S. Hartland, *The Legend of Perseus* III (London 1896) 87–88; the story was collected by the famous Scottish polymath Andrew Lang at Balmaclenan and was published by him in *Academy*, October 1885 (not available to me).

¹⁸ In particular in none of the accounts of the encounter of Hercules and the κῆτος is any mention made of a prophylactic armor. In a Sicilian version of the dragon-killer tale the hero is equipped with protective armor, but this armor then plays no explicit rôle in the battle with the monster: L. Gonzenbach, *Sicilianische Märchen aus dem Volksmund gesammelt* I (Leipzig 1870) 273, 275. For a partial listing of attested dragon-killing techniques see K. Ranke, *Die zwei Brüder: Eine Studie zur vergleichenden Märchenforschung* (Helsinki 1934) 224–26. In a little known mythological text emanating from the Mandaeans, an ancient gnostic sect in Mesopotamia, the plethora of the weapons proper of the hero is presented as providing a passive defense against the devouring monster: “I (Hibil-Ziwa) beheld that Krun, the great hill of flesh who has no bones. . . Then he spoke: ‘Be off with you before I swallow you!’ When he thus spoke to me, I, Hibil-Ziwa, stood fast girt about with an array of swords, sabres, spears, knives and blades, and I said to him: ‘Swallow me!’ Then he said:

dealing with a commonplace feature of the dragon-fighting legend. Though perhaps it would be unwarranted to claim a direct dependence of the Constantine story on the classical tale, the affinity is clear, and it is obvious that there is no need to resort to late and far-fetched oriental parallels.¹⁹ We may simply be faced with the survival of a bit of classical lore, preserved in a *prima facie* unlikely source, into Byzantine times.

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'Now I will swallow you' and he swallowed me up to the middle. Then he spewed me up and brought me forth. He spat venom from his mouth: his intestines, liver and kidneys were cut off" (*Right Ginza* V.1, transl. K. Rudolph in W. Foerster, *Gnosis. A Selection of Gnostic Texts II* [Oxford 1974] 215–16). Since the feature of the spiked armor is lacking, there is no direct connection to our text.

¹⁹ The possibility of an ultimate oriental origin for the theme of the *theriomachia* is of course not denied.