

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).¹ 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.² 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.³

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,⁴ 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.

³ J. Bidez, “Le philosophe Jamblique et son école,” *REG* 32 (1919) 29–40.

⁴ Bidez and Cumont 228.

anonymous.⁵ 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,⁶ 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.⁷ It will be salutary to examine closely what the letters really disclose about Iamblichus and his former pupil.

I

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 θορύβους καὶ πολιορκίας ἀνάγκην καὶ φυγῆς πλάνην καὶ φόβους παντοίους, ἔτι δὲ καὶ χειμῶνων ὑπερβολὰς καὶ νόσων κινδύνους καὶ τὰς ἐκ Παννονίας τῆς ἄνω 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.⁸ 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

⁵ The letters may have been ascribed to the emperor Julian because of his known interest in Iamblichus, cf. J. and J. C. Balty, *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* I (*Annales littéraires de l'Université de Besançon* 166, 1974) 288.

⁶ Bidez and Cumont 228. In his article of 1919, however, Bidez had argued that Iamblichus sent Sopater to the court of Licinius to intervene in support of ‘Hellenism’ (*op.cit.* [*supra* n.3] 35, citing *Epp.* 184, 192).

⁷ *PLRE* I (1971) 846 “Sopater” 1: “He visited Constantine’s court Eun. *V.Soph.* 6.2.1, probably at Nicomedia Ps.-Iul. *Ep.* 184 (c.a. 327) and in Constantinople Ps.-Iul. *Ep.* 185 (?a. 327/8).” The entry for Iamblichus himself, with predictable inconsistency, dates his death ca 325 (*PLRE* I 450–51).

⁸ Cumont, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 24; J. Bidez, *L'Empereur Julien: Oeuvres complètes* I.2: *Lettres et fragments* (Budé, Paris 1924; repr. 1960) 235; W. C. Wright, *The Works of the Emperor Julian* III (LCL, London/New York 1923) 244 n.1; 254 n.1. In their joint edition Bidez and Cumont (228) appear to accept the later date, for they state that the writer came with Constantine from Pannonia to Chalcedon.

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,⁹ 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),¹⁰ 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 316/7.¹¹ 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 Ardiensis. 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 Bosphorus 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: *Ἦλθον ἐκ Παννονίας ἤδη τρίτον ἔτος τουτί, μόλις ἀφ' ὧν οἶσθα κινδύνων καὶ πόνων κωθεῖς. ὑπερβὰς δὲ τὸν Καλχηδόσιον πορθμὸν καὶ ἐπιστὰς τῇ Νικομήδου*

⁹ Zos. 2.22.1–3, cf. *Cod.Theod.* 13.5.4 (8 March 324); 2.17.1 (9 April 324, cf. O. Seeck, *Regesten der Kaiser und Päpste für die Jahre 311 bis 476 n. Chr.* [Stuttgart 1919] 61, 173).

¹⁰ Zos. 2.21; *Origo Constantini Imperatoris* 21 (*vastata Thracia et Moesia*); Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius, *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.

πόλει, σοὶ πρῶτῳ καθάπερ πατρίῳ θεῶ τὰ πρωτόλεια τῶν ἔμαντοῦ σώστρων ἀπέδωκα, σύμβολον τῆς ἀφίξεως τῆς ἐμῆς οἶον ἀντ' ἀναθήματος ἱεροῦ τὴν εἰς σὲ πρόσρησιν ἐκπέμπων. καὶ ἦν ὁ κομίζων τὰ γράμματα τῶν βασιλείων ὑπασπιστῶν εἰς, Ἰουλιανὸς ὄνομα, Βακχύλου παῖς, Ἀπαμεὺς τὸ γένος, ᾧ διὰ τοῦτο μάλιστα τὴν ἐπιστολὴν ἐνεχειρίζον, ὅτι καὶ πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἤξειν καὶ σὲ ἀκριβῶς εἰδέναι καθυπισχνεῖτο. If a member of the emperor's body-guard took that letter from Nicomedia to Syria, then at least two deductions seem permissible: first, that the war of 316/7 had ended and hence that the letter was written no earlier than February 317; second, that the emperor Licinius had already begun to reside in Nicomedia, which is attested as his residence from *ca* 318,¹² as early as the spring of 317. The two letters, therefore, may be dated to spring 317 (181) and to 319 (184).

II

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–18b).¹³ It then followed from their dating of *Ep.* 181 to 323 or 324 that Iamblichus was still alive in or after 325.¹⁴ 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

¹² Socr. *HE* 1.6.33; Soz. *HE* 4.16.6.

¹³ Bidez and Cumont 237: "haec epistula... manifesto prima est earum quas Iamblichos 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.

¹⁴ Bidez, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 32, deduced that Iamblichus died *ca* 325/6.

a complaint (*Ep.* 185, 438D–39A): ὦ Ζεῦ, πῶς ἔχει καλῶς ἡμᾶς μὲν ἐν Θράκῃ διάγειν μέση καὶ τοῖς ἐνταῦθα κυροῖς ἐγχειμάζειν, παρ’ Ἰαμβλίχου δὲ τοῦ καλοῦ καθάπερ ἐώου τινὸς ἕαρος ἡμῶν τὰς ἐπιστολάς ἀντὶ χελιδόνων πέμπεσθαι, καὶ μήτε ἡμῶν εἶναι μηδέπω παρ’ αὐτὸν ἐλθεῖν, μήτ’ αὐτῷ παρ’ ἡμᾶς ἦκειν ἐξεῖναι; τίς ἂν ἐκὼν εἶναι ταῦτα δέξαιτο, ἐὰν μὴ Θράξ τις ἦ καὶ Τηρέως 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.¹⁵ 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 παλαιῶν καὶ σοφῶν ἀνδρῶν, οἷς ἡμᾶς ἐγκρίνειν ἐθέλεις παίζων), and these can readily be construed as comments on the speech which accompanied the first letter (421C προσοῦ δὴ καὶ αὐτὸς τὸν λόγον εὐμενεῖ νεύματι).¹⁷ 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 ἔφην, εἶσω τῶν οἰκείων ὄρων ἐστάναι καὶ τῆς ὑπὸ σοῦ μουσικῆς ἐμφορουμένους ἡρεμεῖν, ὥσπερ οἱ τὴν Ἀπόλλωνος μαντεῖαν ἐξ ἀδύτων ἱερῶν προῖοῦσαν ἠχυρῆ δέχονται).

The date and occasion are hard to deduce from the description given: πρῶτόν σοι τῶν λόγων, οὓς βασιλεῖ κελεύσαντι πρὸς τὴν αἰίδιμον τοῦ πορθμοῦ ζευξίν ἔναγχος ἐξεργασάμεθα, ἐπειδὴ τοῦτό ἐστι τὸ δοκοῦν, ἀπαρξώμεθα. 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, 16–17; *CIL* III 10107.

¹⁶ *Illustrated London News*, October 1975, 97–99.

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.”¹⁹ 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 315,²⁰ 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).²¹ 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.²² 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}).²³ 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.

²² G. Mau, *RE* 9 (1916) 645.

²³ Bidez, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 32. His date for Iamblichus’ death is accepted by A. C. Lloyd, *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (London 1967) 295 (“about 326”); E. R. Dodds, *OCD*² (1970) 538; *PLRE* I 450–51; B. D. Larsen, *Jamblique de Chalcis. Exégète et philosophe* (Aarhus 1972) 34 (*ca* 325).

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 Ἰάμβλιχος ὁ φιλόσοφος ἐδίδασκεν, οἰκῶν ἐν Δάφνῃ ἕως τῆς τελευτῆς 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,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.²⁵ It is quite possible, therefore, that Iamblichus taught in Antioch in the 290's.²⁶ It is also possible that he deliberately withdrew to the philosophical centre of Apamea about the time that persecution of the Christians commenced²⁷—perhaps in order to avoid any direct political involvement.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.

²⁷ For philosophy at Apamea, see Saffrey, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.25) 231; J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists. A Study of Platonism 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (London 1977) 361.

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, 439^{BC}; 184, 417^D). 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.”²⁹ 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.³⁰

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²⁹ R. E. Witt, “Iamblichus as a Forerunner of Julian,” in *Entretiens Hardt* 21 (Vandœuvres-Genève 1975) 41.

³⁰ I am grateful to Professor G. W. Bowersock for comment and advice on an earlier version of the present article.