

# The Legendary History of Byzantium

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## Article abstract

Parce que les chroniques sur l'histoire de Byzance visaient généralement à justifier l'Empire Romain, les relations entre la volonté divine et les choses humaines y tiennent toujours une place importante. Les légendes qu'elles contiennent sont le véhicule préféré pour les idées que les chroniqueurs désiraient propager. L'auteur de cet article analyse brièvement un certain nombre de légendes et en dégage le message que le chroniqueur voulait livrer.

**JOHN WORTLEY**

*Précis*

Parce que les chroniques sur l'histoire de Byzance visaient généralement à justifier l'Empire Romain, les relations entre la volonté divine et les choses humaines y tiennent toujours une place importante. Les légendes qu'elles contiennent sont le véhicule préféré pour les idées que les chroniqueurs désiraient propager. L'auteur de cet article analyse brièvement un certain nombre de légendes et en dégage le message que le chroniqueur voulait livrer.

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## *The Legendary History of Byzantium*

The later Roman Empire was distinguished in many ways, and adorned by many riches, but in a few things was it more opulent than in written records of its accomplishments, which flowed in near unbroken succession from the pens of many writers, from the day Byzantium became Constantinople almost to the day when it became Istanbul. Even to speak of a flow is to conceal something of the diversity of the records, for three currents of what might be termed historical writing flourished in Byzantium, not totally independently of each other, but largely so.

The first, and most respectable, stream, was that of the true historians, who drew both their inspiration and their language from ancient Hellas, and at least attempted that analysis of the concatenation of cause and effect which is the craft of the historian. They produced studies of circumscribed periods or subjects, some of which can still be found on the shelves of any respectable book shop; the *Alexiad* of the “crown princess” Anna Comnena, the *Chronographia* of the sometime chief minister of state, Michael Psellus, and the Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus’ biography of his imperial grandfather, the *Vita Basillii*<sup>1</sup> are obvious examples.

The second current was that of the ecclesiastical historians, Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and Evagrius and their successors, men with a specialised interest in the ecclesiastical politics which played so important a part in the early development of the Byzantine State.

The third current was that of the chronicles, the least distinguished of the three in its writers (who with the exception of one patriarch and one saint, were largely unknown men), in its method (which rarely attempted more than to set down a chronological catalogue of events), and in its language, for the chronicler rejected the “Attic” language of the secular schools and employed something more closely related to the spoken tongue. Whereas the true historians are redolent of the classical and humanist traditions of the imperial (secular) academy at Constantinople, the chronicles smack of the patriarchal seminary and the monastic school. Theirs is a long tradition, with roots in writings of which only the authors’ names have survived. The oldest extant complete chronicles are the sixth-century *Chronographia* of John Malalas, a citizen of Antioch,<sup>2</sup> and the seventh-century Alexandrine *Chronicon Paschale*. In the ninth century

these provided the basis for the Chronicles of George the Monk, and for a work which is in many ways to be ranked a little higher than the Chronicles, if not amongst the histories, the *Chronographia* of Theophanes,<sup>3</sup> a saint in the Orthodox Calendar.

True historical writing revived in the tenth century under the encouragement of the Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, himself one of the "continuators" of Theophanes, whilst the Chronicle-tradition degenerated in quality, but continued vigorously. Around 1100 the monk George Cedrenus produced his large, gossipy, *Συνοψις*, *Ἱστοριῶν* based largely on the still unpublished tenth-century "Chronicle of the Logethete" (Paris. 1712, 'Pseudo-Symeon'). A little later there appeared in the *Συνοψις Ἱστορικῆς* of Constantine Manasses, 6733 lines in political verse, of which more manuscripts survive than of any other chronicle.

From the twelfth century onwards, it is possible to discern three separating traditions of chronicle-writing, which influenced each other to a certain extent:

1. The work of John Zonaras was a largely successful attempt to lift chronicle into the realm of serious literature, in which he had lamentably few successors.
2. Michael Glycas' *Βιβλος Χρονικῆς*, which is little more than a pedestrian abbreviation of Cedrenus, is a typical product of the mainstream of the chronicle tradition; the so-called *Synopsis Sathas*<sup>4</sup> may be noted as a further example.
3. The great popularity of Manasses' metrical chronicle led directly to a new phenomenon, the 'vulgar chronicle', or chronicle, written in the speech of the people. There are many extant manuscripts of works of this nature, by no means all of which have yet been properly examined. The basis of many of them appears to be in a vulgar-Greek (prose) translation of Manasses' work, edited and augmented as time progressed. From this confused tradition emerged a single work under the (doubtless incorrect) name of Dorotheus of Monemvasia, printed at Venice in 1631, and many times reprinted down to 1821. As late as the eighteenth century, another massive Chronicle was composed by one Athanasius Comnenus Ypsilantes, — but the portion down to the year 1453 still remains unpublished.

The chroniclers of Byzantium were not in any sense of the term trying to be objective, any more than the historians were, but there is an important distinction to be made between the two groups. For the most part the historians set out to produce a *pièce justificative* for a person, an emperor in the case of Constantine Porphyrogenitus and Anna (their grandfather and father respectively,) or for himself in the case of Psellus. The chroniclers, on the other hand, set themselves

no less a task than the justification of the Roman Empire to which they belonged within the total framework of human history perceived within the context of the divine dispensation. Consequently their works are universal histories (or the continuations of world histories) which are also theological treatments of the relationship which the writers discerned between the will of God and the affairs of man. For them, the empire in which they lived was the fourth, last, and greatest of the kingdoms foreseen by the prophet Daniel, and their work has to be seen in the light of the hypothetical projections of their story into the future and to the end of time which were produced by another group of byzantine writers who had much in common with the chronographers: the apocalypists.

For the most part, the chronicles are rather dull reading, enlivened here and there by a spirited rendering of some colourful event, but otherwise providing little more than lists of apparently unconnected names and events, with little distinction between their varying degrees of importance. But sprinkled throughout the narratives are stories of a legendary nature, some of which are very intriguing, even though they make a negligible contribution to the historian's enquiry. Not surprisingly, these stories are rarely taken seriously, but they probably should be, if for nothing else, because the chroniclers themselves took them seriously, and because their readers obviously relished them. Few of the chroniclers ever failed to reproduce, and to expand, a story inherited from earlier works (Theophanes was one of the few who shows any discrimination in this respect,) and usually each new chronicle showed a significant increase in the proportion of legendary to factual matter. In fact, as time progressed, the legendary material became so popular that it began to drive out the other material. In the vulgar tradition represented by the chronicle of "Dorotheus of Monemvasia" for instance, the description of the reign of the Emperor Basil I (the Macedonian,) which even the most superficial student of byzantine affairs knows to have been of crucial importance, is little more than the narration of seven legends connected with that emperor, mostly attempting to harmonise his regicidal usurpation with the will of God.<sup>5</sup> This is an exceptional case, but there are many lesser ones. It need hardly be pointed out that a similar displacement took place in the *Lives* of the saints, where in many instances, the accretion of legendary material came near to obscuring the earlier deposit.

It may be a little misleading to refer to these stories as 'legends'; some of them are undoubtedly highly improbable, such as the one which says that in Justinian's reign a child was swept up into the heavens and then sent back to earth to tell the people how the hymn *Trisagion* ought to be sung in the liturgy.<sup>6</sup> But there are other stories which could conceivably contain a grain of truth embedded within. The important point is that, likely and unlikely stories were equally accorded a degree of importance which is out of all proportion to any historical significance they may have possessed. Indeed, it can be argued that these stories have an importance of a very different kind. A significance which is related not to the events which they narrate, but to the mentality of the writers who perpetrated them and *a fortiori*, of the people with whom they were so popular.

The perpetrators were men of the cloth; churchmen trained, not in the secular (Θυραθεν) learning which was the common heritage of sophisticated byzantine society, but in the sacred (εσωθεν) learning of the bible and the *Lives* of the Saints. For these men, the Old Testament was almost as important as the New. They revered its heroes almost as highly as they honoured the saints of the new dispensation, cherishing their relics and keeping feasts in their honour in a way which was foreign to the churchmen of the west.

The reason for this was two-fold; the Greek-speaking world took very seriously the teaching of St. Paul that the church was the New Israel, and it had a great capital city with a wonderful cathedral (after Justinian's time,) which together provided a visible expression of the idea of New Jerusalem and the new temple. From this base, it was a short step to draw a direct line (which is precisely what the Chroniclers did) of continuity from Jerusalem to Constantinople, from old Israel to the New Roman Empire, from Solomon to Justinian, and so forth. Consequently they tended to inherit the ideas and convictions of their predecessors of old Israel, the writers of *Kings* and *Chronicles*, and to apply them to their narration of the succeeding reigns of the later Roman Emperors. Needless to say, the material did not always fit their preformed ideas quite so neatly as they would like it to, and they were obliged to adjust the picture a little to produce the required effect, just as the hagiographers were careful to ensure that the picture they presented was that of an ideal saint who could be held up as a model to the imitated. Chronicler and hagiographer alike saw themselves not as relayers of information, but as men trying to produce an edifying effect on their contemporaries, not so much concerned with how things were or are, but with how they should be or should have been. Consequently, the chroniclers, probably without realising what they were doing, shaped their story to fit their beliefs. This they did most effectively by the simple process of leaving out what was incongruous to their thinking, and as epitomists, they had good reason to leave out a great deal. But they also did it by including, or over-emphasizing, those stories which reinforced their prejudices — and this I think is where the 'legends' come in.

It is of course impossible to review all the Byzantine legends in one paper (there are scores of them,) but it is possible to examine one *stratum* in the legendary deposit. There is a group of legends, five in number, which appear in the two earliest extant complete chronicles — John Malalas' and the *Chronicon Paschale*. They appear in sufficiently variant forms in the respective documents to indicate a common source, which had already been in existence long enough to have acquired the marks of frequent handling, but not yet long enough for them to have developed widely differing versions as they did later on.

The first and the last of the five in chronological order are dream stories. Dreams were taken very seriously by the Byzantines, but of course this need not be attributed exclusively to the Old Testament heritage.<sup>7</sup> The dream, occurring as it does in the intermediate state between life and death (sleep), was seen as a potential trysting place for the two worlds in which people once believed they

lived; the visible and the invisible, and in it, communication could take place between those worlds. Dreams and visions, without any particular distinction being made between the two, abound in byzantine literature, especially in hagiography. When they occur in the chronicles they are usually to emperors, revealing some aspect of the future, or to a person revealing something about an emperor which has happened, or is about to happen (for the chronicles are nothing if they are not books about emperors).

The story of the dream of the Emperor Anastasius I (491-518), which supposedly took place in the last year of his reign, appears like this in its earliest extant form, *i.e.* in John Malalas:

A little later, in a dream, the same emperor (Anastasius) saw a full-grown and well dressed man standing before him, holding a book with writing in it which he was reading; and when he had gone through five leaves, he read the emperor's name, and said to him: 'Look, I am taking away fourteen (years) because of your insatiate greed (*απληστια*),' and with his finger he did what he said.

The Emperor Anastasius himself awoke in fear; summoning the Chamberlain and *Praepositus* Amantius, he told him what he had seen in his dream. This Amantius said to him: 'Oh emperor, live for ever! I too saw in a dream this very night, that as I was standing in your presence, a pig, like a great wild boar (*χοιρος ωσπερ σαργος μεγας*), came up behind me, seized the first fold of my robe (*την αρχην της χλαμυδος*) in its mouth, threw me to the ground, then trampled and destroyed me.'

The Emperor summoned the learned Proclus the Asian, the dream-interpreter (*ονειροκριτος*) who was very skilled, and told him of his vision, and also of what Amantius had seen. He made the meaning of the vision clear to them, and also that they would soon die.<sup>8</sup>

The "full-grown man" is a figure familiar enough to those who study byzantine dreams and visions. More usually described as youthful and good-looking, he is of course the messenger of God. The five leaves and fourteen years doubtless had a significance for those who first told this story, which may now be irretrievably lost. The response of Amantius is a *verbatim* repeat of what the Chaldean dream-interpreters said to Nebuchadnezzar ("in Syrian") when he sought (in vain) from them an interpretation of his famous dream.<sup>9</sup> The byzantine court seems to have maintained a regular dream-interpreter, who in this case was obviously something of a scholar (*φιλόσοφος*). The science of dream interpreting was a serious business and had its own literature, enough of which has survived to give a reasonable picture of the way it worked.<sup>10</sup> It may be noted that since Anastasius was certainly eighty, and possibly even ninety, years of age at this time, no particularly great skill was required to predict an early death.

“If he had not held heretical opinions, historians would have had little but praise for the Emperor Anastasius” remarked Bury,<sup>11</sup> but alas, he did have heretical opinions, and what is worse, they seem to have moved further away from the orthodox position as he aged. He was well known for his dislike of the Chalcedonian definition even before Ariadne chose him to succeed her deceased spouse (otherwise he might have acceded to the episcopal throne of Antioch in 488).<sup>12</sup> Having made a written declaration of his orthodoxy at the outset of his reign, he steadily supported the compromise position prescribed in Zeno’s *Henoticon* for some years, then towards the end of his reign, retracted his initial declaration, and openly supported the monophysites.

Now for those who, like the chroniclers, have taken the Bible as the basis of their intellectual equipment, history is a relatively simple matter. There are two kinds of kings, good and bad, described in the books of *Samuel*, *Kings* and *Chronicles* (which formed an integral part of the byzantine world chronicle) as those who “did that which was righteous” and those who “did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord.” The first kind flourished, the second foundered; the first kind died peacefully in their beds, whilst the second were cut short and died unpleasantly. Anastasius had obviously “done that which was evil” in forsaking orthodoxy, and therefore could not have “lived long and seen good days.”

Yet, curiously, the dream story reported here says nothing of his heretical tendencies; curious too that Justin I should be portrayed as “a pig, like a great wild boar,” with its unflattering reference to Psalm 79/80:14, for Justin it was who annihilated Amantius, an event which may reasonably be supposed to have taken place before the story of the vision went into circulation. These two considerations taken together would seem to point to the story having originated in monophysite *milieu*. Yet even for monophysites, this emperor was not without fault. Having learned to care for the exchequer as a silentiary, he continued to give it careful attention as emperor, and was so successful that when he died, the state coffers contained the staggering sum of 320,000 pounds of gold, in spite of his having abolished the unpopular *chrysargyron* tax. His success was largely due to what today would have to be pronounced a retrograde step. He took the collection of the *annonae* out of the hands of the town corporations, and re-allocated it to tax farmers (*vindices*), awarding collection areas to the highest bidders. This could only lead to trouble, which indeed it did, for these *vindices* treated the cities like hostile communities, and this no doubt largely contributed to Anastasius’ reputation for greed — with which he is charged in the dream.<sup>13</sup> Amantius the chamberlain appears to have been associated with the author of the tax farming system, Marinus the Syrian, and both were subsequently eliminated by Justin.

The point of the vision story is this: that no matter what might be said in this emperor’s favour (John the Lydian described him as intelligent, well-educated, gentle and yet energetic, able to command his temper, and generous in bestowing gifts)<sup>14</sup> in the eyes of the chroniclers (even monophysites,) he was “a bad thing”,



(even the judicious Theophanes first introduces him as *ὁ μετα ταυτα κακως βασιλευλας*).<sup>15</sup> Therefore divine justice intervened, and did not allow him to live out his days and die a natural death. Later chronicles emphasized the point by describing a death plagued by terror or fire and torment, but it must have been a near thing if they were right in saying that he was then aged ninety years and five months!<sup>16</sup>

A more obvious example of the same sort of thing is to be found in a group of dream-stories about the death of Julian the Apostate. Few emperors have been so thoroughly disliked by men of the cloth as this one, for his attempted revival of paganism, and his near-successful attempt to eliminate Christianity by the simple expedient of removing all restraints on the warring factions within the church. A non-partisan historian might very well come to the conclusion that Julian was, on the whole, a good emperor — as indeed Ammianus Marcellinus did, praising him as a man *virtute senior quam aetate*. He admits that the laws forbidding Christians to teach unless they sacrificed to the pagan deities was unjust, but otherwise he provides a list of Julian's virtues which is considerably longer than the tally of his short-comings.<sup>17</sup> All this of course is a very long way removed from the savage beast which is the Julian of the ecclesiastical historians and of the chronographers, who themselves had no doubt which was the real Julian, and found to hand several stories which would leave the reader in no doubt either.<sup>18</sup>

There is one story, which appears in various forms in different works, but which always makes the same point: that Julian's death was no mere accident, nor the reward of too much bravery, but rather the deliberate interference in the world-order of a Christian God exasperated beyond endurance by this emperor's impiety. "All men . . . concur in receiving the account which has been handed down to us, and which evidences his death to have been a result of Divine wrath," wrote Sozomen, and adds a story about of friend of Julian:

He had, it is related, traveled into Persia, with the intention of joining the emperor. While on the road, he found himself so far from any habitation that he was obliged, on one night, to sleep in a church. He saw, during that night, either in a dream or a vision, all the apostles and prophets assembled together, and complaining of the injuries which the emperor had inflicted on the Church, and consulting concerning the best measures to be adopted. After much deliberation and embarrassment two individuals arose in the midst of the assembly, desired the others to be of good cheer, and left the company hastily, as if to deprive Julian of the imperial power. He who was the spectator of this marvel did not attempt to pursue his journey, but awaited, in horrible suspense, the conclusion of this revelation. He laid himself down to sleep again, in the same place, and again he saw the same assembly; the two individuals who had appeared to depart the preceding night to effect their purpose against Julian, suddenly returned and announced his death to the others.

Sozomen also includes this demonstration:

On the same day a vision was sent to Didymus, an ecclesiastical philosopher, who dwelt at Alexandria; and who, being deeply grieved at the errors of Julian and his persecution of the churches, fasted and offered up supplications to God continually on this account. From the effects of anxiety and want of food during the previous night, he fell asleep while sitting in his chair. Then being, as it were, in an ecstasy, he beheld white horses traversing the air, and heard a voice saying to those who were riding thereon, "Go and tell Didymus that Julian has been slain just at this hour; let him communicate this intelligence to Athanasius, the bishop, and let him arise and eat."<sup>19</sup>

Theodoret knew a similar story about Saint Julian the monk, who

continued all the more zealously to offer his prayers to the God of all, when he heard of the impious tyrant's threats. On the very day on which Julian was slain, he heard of the event while at his prayers, although the Monastery was distant more than twenty stages from the army. It is related that while he was invoking the Lord with loud cries and supplicating his merciful Master, he suddenly checked his tears, broke into an ecstasy of delight, while his countenance was lighted up and thus signified the joy that possessed his soul. When his friends beheld this change they begged him to tell them the reason of his gladness. "The wild boar," said he, "the enemy of the vineyard of the Lord, has paid the penalty of the wrongs he had done to Him; he lies dead. His mischief is done." The whole company no sooner heard these words than they leaped with joy and struck up the song of thanksgiving to God, and from those that brought tidings of the emperor's death they learnt that it was the very day and hour when the accursed man was slain that the aged Saint knew it and announced it.<sup>20</sup>

It is even said that the great Libanius received forewarning of the emperor's death from a Christian pedagogue, whom he had asked derisively, "What is the carpenter's son doing now?" and received the answer: "making a coffin."<sup>21</sup>

With so many stories to choose from in the ecclesiastical histories, the chronographers preferred another of their own, perhaps because it was associated neither with Alexandria nor with Antioch:

In that same night (that Julian died) the most holy Basil, Bishop of Caesarea, dreamed that he saw the heavens opened and Christ the Saviour sitting on a throne, and saying with a loud voice, "Mercury, go and slay the Emperor Julian who is against Christians." St. Mercury, who stood near the throne wearing an iron breastplate, obeyed the command and disappeared. Then there he was again before the throne of the Lord, and he proclaimed, "The Emperor Julian is slain and has died as you commanded O Lord." The bishop Basil awoke, alarmed by the voice and very troubled (for the Emperor Julian held him in esteem as educated and a fellow scholar and often wrote to him.) Bishop Basil came into church for Mattins, and told all the clergy the secret of his dream and that the Emperor Julian was slain and had died that night. They all besought him to be silent and to say nothing.<sup>22</sup>

This strange story, not unlike another one set in the context of the legend of the Emperor Maurice (which itself is a story with a point to make,)<sup>23</sup> has a number of curious features, not the least of which is the inescapable fact that Basil did not accede to the episcopal throne of Caesarea until seven years after the death of Julian. Curious also is the alleged respect for Basil, for whilst he might have been the emperor's fellow student long ago in Athens, he is elsewhere reputed to have written a prophetic book against him.<sup>24</sup> Visions of the celestial court are very rare even in Byzantine hagiography, and for a people whose government shrank from awarding the death sentence, there must have been something rather shocking in this story. The choice of Saint Mercury as the celestial assassin is understandable; he was a professional soldier (*stratelatês*) martyred and buried at Caesarea in the time of Decius, whose shrine became a famed source of healings and miracles.

Lying behind all these stories about Julian however, is the belief that his violent death in battle was his own condemnation, an act of God who says "vengeance is mine, I will repay." This can be seen from a passage in which the ecclesiastical historian Evagrius turns aside from his narrative to contradict some of the assertions of the pagan historian, Zosimus. "Let us consider," he writes, "under what circumstances heathen and Christian emperors have respectively closed their reigns." There follows a rhetorical passage listing the unpleasant ways in which many of the old Roman emperors went to their graves, then comes this passage:

But from the time that the renowned Constantine succeeded to the empire, and had dedicated to Christ the City which bears his name, mark me, whether any of those who have reigned there, except Julian thy (=Zosimus') hierophant and monarch, have perished by the hands of either domestic or foreign foes and whether a rival has overthrown any of them . . . I also agree with thee in what thou sayest about Valens, who had inflicted so many evils upon the Christians: for of any other case not even thou thyself makest mention<sup>25</sup>

It was of course a dangerous hypothesis to hold in later years, but until the time of the unfortunate Emperor Maurice, not wholly untenable. The death of Julian was a certain proof of his guilt, and the stories of divine intervention were no more and no less than a peremptory warning to anybody who might have picked up some of that nonsense about Julian having died bravely in battle with the Persians and their elephants, not to be misled; he had done atrocious evil in the sight of God, and God is not deceived!

If Anastasius and Julian had to be coloured black for ecclesiastical reasons, there was another emperor whom it was most desirable to colour white. He was Valentinian I (364-375), an emperor who in many ways measured up to the ecclesiastical ideal: an orthodox (Nicene) Christian who had suffered for his faith (he was exiled by Julian), supposedly responsible for the elevation of Ambrose to the see of Milan (and thus for the celebrated chastisement of Theodosius the Great

by that bishop),<sup>26</sup> he was the founder of an orthodox dynasty of some duration (though this claim was stretching a point a little, since Arcadius and Honorius were in fact children of Theodosius' first wife, and not of Valentinian's daughter.) Whilst refusing to pronounce on matters ecclesiastical — which he held to be the proper business of clergy, not of kings<sup>27</sup> — he nevertheless tried (in vain) to restrain the pro-Arian behaviour of his brother, Valens, whom he had appointed emperor in the east (and who met his deserved end at the battle of Adrianople). For all this he was held in highest esteem, and received from Theophanes the title *ὁ μέγας*, “the great.” Yet there were some disquieting facts about him: his bigamy for instance, and above all, his cruelty, which at times reached savage proportions. It was probably this aspect of his reign that brought the following story into existence:

The most divine Emperor Valentinian put many senators and governors to death for injustice, theft and greed. There was a very rich and powerful man, the chief eunuch, named Rhodian, who, as curator of the imperial palace, was held in great esteem. This man the emperor burned alive with faggots at the far end of the hippodrome in the course of the equestrian events. His crime was that he had seized the property of a poor widow called Veronica, intimidating her by his great reputation. She gained audience with the Emperor Valentinian — who appointed Salust the Patrician to judge the case. He gave judgment against the *Praepositus* Rhodian, and when the Emperor learned of Salust's decision, he order this *Praepositus* to give back to the widow what he had taken from her. But he would not obey, and did not restore her property; in fact he appealed against Salust the Patrician. The Emperor was angered, and himself commanded the woman to wait upon him whilst he was watching the events in the hippodrome. She came to him early, during the fifth race. Rhodian the *Praepositus* was standing by at the Emperor's right hand, and at the imperial command, he was torn from the tribune in the sight of the whole city, carried off to the far end of the hippodrome and burned. The emperor bestowed upon the widow-woman the entire estate of Rhodian the *Praepositus* and he was acclaimed by all the people and the senate as just and strict.<sup>28</sup>

There are a number of stories in the chronicles about emperors who stepped in to avenge the poor little person being oppressed by the rich and powerful; it was obviously the sort of thing that men wanted to believe, and in this instance, it could remove the sting of a damaging charge which might be made against an otherwise “good” emperor.

The story of the Empress Athenais-Eudocia is intriguing by any standards, the more so since there will always remain the possibility that in spite of its improbability, it just could have happened. The *dramatis personae* are four. First, we have a woman of impeccable piety and rigid determination to consider, in many ways the byzantine princess *par excellence*, the blessed Pulcheria, who at the age of sixteen (in 414) assumed the regency in the name of the second character, her younger brother, the Emperor Theodosius II (who was then only fourteen) dedicating herself to pious works and his education. The third

character was the young Emperor's fellow student and bosom-companion, a certain Paulinus, son of the Count of the Domestic Corps. Eventually, Theodosius, who seems to have possessed more intelligence than determination, acceded to the purple in his own right, though the actual management of affairs seems to have remained in his sister's hands for many years. At the age of twenty, he desired a wife, and turned to Pulcheria for guidance, stipulating only that the lady be of pleasing appearance. She and Paulinus immediately took the matter in hand, apparently preparing to hold one of those "bride shows" for which the later empire is famous. However, events rendered this unnecessary; even then a maiden was arriving at Constantinople, driven there, it would seem, by events which appear to belong more properly to the land of make-believe than of reality, and this may be the case. The maiden in question, the fourth character in the drama, was Athenais, daughter of a wealthy Athenian philosopher named Leontius who had died recently, and this was what brought her to the Capital, for he had left everything he owned to his two sons, whilst Athenais had to be content with a mere one hundred pieces of gold "because she is endowed more richly than any other woman" (so said the father). She was coming to appeal against the will, and in so doing, came to the notice of Pulcheria, who being struck by her beauty and education, suggested her as a wife to Theodosius. He and Paulinus viewed her privily through a curtain and the result was love at first sight. She was baptised with the name Eudocia, and married to the emperor on 7th June, 421. Paulinus was best man at the wedding, and remained their constant companion at table, receiving appropriate promotions, which gave him, as Malalas points out (perhaps in the light of what is to follow) "frequent access to the Augusta Eudocia."

Many long years passed during which Pulcheria, Theodosius, Paulinus and Athenais-Eudocia lived together in reasonable harmony at the palace. But there came one fateful day when it all fell apart, January 6th, 443 or 444:

It so happened that after some time, the Emperor Theodosius went to church on the feast of Epiphany; the Master of the Offices, Paulinus was ailing from an affliction of the foot, so he was excused and did not go. A certain poor man presented the Emperor Theodosius with a Phrygian apple larger than anyone had ever seen; the emperor and the whole senate were amazed at it. Immediately the emperor gave the poor man 150 pieces of gold, and sent the apple to the Augusta Eudocia. The Augusta sent it to Paulinus, Master of the Offices, because he was the emperor's friend. He, not knowing that it was the emperor who had sent it to the Augusta, himself sent it to the Emperor Theodosius as he was coming back into the palace. Recognizing it, the Emperor Theodosius accepted it without telling the Augusta, and hid it. Then he sent for her and asked her: 'Where is the apple I sent you?' She said: 'I have eaten it.' He adjured by his own salvation to say whether she had eaten it, or sent it to somebody else. She swore that she had eaten it. Then, he ordered the apple to be produced, and showed it to her. He was angry with her, because he suspected that it was as the lover of Paulinus that she had sent him the apple and denied doing so, so the Emperor Theodosius slew this Paulinus. In her distress at the subsequent scandal (for everybody knew that

it was because of her that Paulinus was put to death, and he was a very good-looking young man,) the Augusta Eudocia asked permission to go and pray at the holy places . . .<sup>29</sup>

Such is the story. It is rendered less probable by the fact that Paulinus appears to have been slain *after* Eudocia's departure, not before. Nevertheless, he certainly was slain, and she certainly went to Jerusalem and never returned; she died there professing her innocence sixteen years later.<sup>30</sup>

Were Paulinus and the Empress "having an affair," or were they the innocent victims of an attempt to rid the Capital of their influence, say by an eclipsed Pulcheria, or a jealous Theodosius? Certainly some explaining had to be done, for byzantine empresses did not habitually desert their spouses (the only other instance which comes to mind, the case of the Empress Theophano, is scarcely comparable, as there was very obviously 'another woman,' whom Leo VI later married) nor did emperors turn on and murder their bosom-companions. The situation is bizarre, and has held the interest of scholars down the centuries. The chronographers each gave it a special emphasis, and even the literary world of eighteenth-century France debated the question of whether Athenais-Eudocia was or was not an adulteress.<sup>31</sup> Bury himself, whilst withholding judgment, could not resist the temptation to retell the story of the apple, pointing out, "that in Greek romances the apple was a conventional love-gift, and meant on the part of a woman who bestowed it on a man, a declaration of love."<sup>32</sup>

There are anecdotes here and there in the chronographies which seem to have been drawn into existence by an apparent vacuum created by the tension between the identifiable facts and the pre-existent convictions of the chronographers. A typical instance is the legend of the Emperor Maurice, a noble and righteous ruler who died an atrocious death. (The incongruity was resolved by the story of a vision permitting him to choose to suffer for his faults in this world, rather than in the next.)<sup>33</sup> The story of the apple can be seen as another such resolution story, for consider: three of the four persons involved in the *maison à quatre* were of imperial rank, of impeccable orthodoxy, and each was deeply revered by churchmen for his or her munificence towards, and zeal for, the church. The good works of the "blessed Pulcheria" as she was often called at the Capital, and of Athenais-Eudocia at Jerusalem, would make a long list, whilst the emperor himself did nothing to offend, and a great deal to assist his sister and wife (he was also "well-educated, and loved by all the people and the Senate").<sup>34</sup> All three were "a good thing" to use the somewhat naïve criterion of the chronographers, and "did that which was righteous in the sight of the Lord." Yet how was the estrangement of the wife to be explained without casting suspicion of adultery on her, or of intrigue on Pulcheria, or of unreasonable conduct on the part of the husband, or any permutation of those three? The advantage of the apple story is that it saves the day for all three persons (Paulinus, not being of imperial rank, was expendable) by setting everything down to an almost ridiculous coincidence which seems to savour more of the Restoration stage than the imperial court of the Queen of Cities.

Nevertheless, it stuck, perhaps for the simple reason that men wanted it to stick. That all three imperial persons were later enrolled among the select few whose death-dates were celebrated by an annual *synaxis* at their tombs is probably the mark of its success.<sup>35</sup> Certainly anybody who has ever heard of the philosopher-Empress Athenais-Eudocia is sure to have read the story of the apple, and to have wondered about her morals.

The last of the five stories is also connected with the court of Theodosius II, and might even be in some way related to the question of the empress' fidelity, but this is little more than supposition on Bury's part.<sup>36</sup> Of all the stories considered here, this one seems to have been the most popular, for the two versions in Malalas and *Chronicon Paschale* already show some marked variations and later chroniclers developed it considerably by the addition of details here and there.

The basic story as it first appears in Malalas, is about Cyrus of Panopolis, who was in the exceptional position of holding two high appointments under Theodosius II: he was both Praetorian Prefect of the Orient and Prefect of the City. Much of the credit which usually goes to Theodosius II, who in truth was something of a *roi fainéant*, really belongs to a series of capable administrators who served him loyally throughout his reign, and amongst these must be numbered Cyrus of Panopolis, ὁ φιλοσοφος ἀνηρ σοφωτατος ἐν πασι, says Malas, who may have been a "Hellene," which at that time meant an unconverted pagan.<sup>37</sup> Cyrus' most distinguished service to the state lay in his care for the public buildings of Constantinople, and especially in his construction of the famous "Theodosian walls" which withstood all attacks for a thousand years. Cyrus became so popular with the people of the capital that one day at the Hippodrome, in the presence of the emperor, the crowd chanted all day long: "Constantine built, Cyrus renewed; make way for him, Augustus!"<sup>38</sup> This of course was dangerous stuff, and the result was that Cyrus, Hellene or no, was obliged to take holy orders, and was sent off to be bishop of Cotyaeum in Phrygia, a city not far enough removed to kill him by the journey (exile was often a sentence to death by travel in those days,) but a dangerous posting, as the citizens of Cotyaeum had already murdered no less than four bishops. Given his pagan reputation into the bargain, it must have been with a very heavy heart indeed that Cyrus set off for his diocese in December of 441 or 442. His flock awaited him as brigands lie in wait for an unarmed traveller, and when he came to them at Christmas, they insisted that he preach to them during the Liturgy of the nativity. In response to their tumultuous demands, he reluctantly mounted the pulpit, and pronounced the traditional greeting ("The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost be with you always."). Then he began his — no doubt extempore — homily: "Brethren, let the birth of God, our Saviour Jesus Christ, be honoured by silence, because it was only by hearing that the Word was conceived in the holy Virgin. To Him be the glory, for ever and ever, Amen." The effect of this, which must be the shortest sermon on record, was to win over the people completely in support of their new bishop, who settled in with them and apparently lived out his days in

peace; *επεσκοπηθεν αυτοις ευσεβως* added Theophanes, perhaps on the authority of hearsay.<sup>39</sup>

There is of course nothing impossible about this story, and it is only a little unlikely; the east Romans were notoriously fickle *en masse*, and emperors did "say to this man, go, and he goeth." If, however, the story was an invention then it can be seen as a "make-up" story, much in the same way as the apple story was. Theodosius II, for all his piety and good works, was only human, and as a man, might well give way to suspicion and jealousy of a minister who seemed to be growing too powerful, even to the point of giving him what was meant to be a death sentence. But, as Cranmer averred, "the hearts of kings are in Thy rule and governance," which could be taken to mean that when they made mistakes, divine intervention sometimes saved the day and set matters right before it was too late.

This, however, is assuming that for every legend there must be a *rationale*; need this necessarily be the case? May it not be that some of the stories were told and retold for no other reason than that they were *good* stories? It has to be admitted that as good stories go, the Cyrus story is a *very* good one. Moreover, it was a story with an obvious and salutary morale which there was good reason for keeping before the eyes of ecclesiasts, and, for that matter, any other persons "who think that they shall be heard for their much speaking."

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Theophanes Continuatus* Book Five; no English translation is available yet.

<sup>2</sup> Except where it is expressly stated to be otherwise, all the byzantine writers are to be found in the *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* (Bonn, 1828-97).

<sup>3</sup> Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. Charles De Boor (2 vols., Leipzig, 1883, 1885).

<sup>4</sup> ed. Constantine N. Sathas, *Bibliotheca Graeca Medii Aevi*, vol. VII (Venice and Paris, 1894).

<sup>5</sup> Dorotheus of Monemvasia, *Biblion Istorikon* (Venice, 1818), pp. 346-350. Another similar anecdote occurs in Cod. Vindob. suppl. graec. p. 172, ff. 54-55.

<sup>6</sup> Constantine Manasses, lines 2746-2753.

<sup>7</sup> For instance in 702, the Emperor Apsimar exiled a certain Philippicus merely for having dreamed that he would become emperor (*ως δνειροπολούμενον βασιλεύειν*); Theophanes, p. 372<sup>7-11</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Malalas, pp. 408-409; *Chronicon Paschale*, pp. 610-611 (*cf.* Theophanes, pp. 163<sup>31</sup>-164<sup>8</sup>; Cedrenus I, p. 636.)

<sup>9</sup> *Βασιλευ, εις τον αιωνα ηθι: Daniel 2<sup>4</sup>.*

<sup>10</sup> See Karl Krumbacher, *Geschichte der Byzantinischen Litteratur*, second edition (2 vols., Munich, 1897), pp. 629-630.

<sup>11</sup> J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* (2 vols., London, 1923), I, p. 446.

<sup>12</sup> Theophanes, p. 135<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> John the Lydian, *De Magistratibus* III, 49; see also III, 46 for his reputation for greed.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 47.

<sup>15</sup> Theophanes, p. 135<sup>24</sup>.



<sup>16</sup> This age is given in *Chronicon Paschale*. Cedrenus (I, p. 636) adds that the dream-  
interpreter having said Anastasius would die by fire, “to prevent this he made many open-  
ings to the palace cistern, called ψυχρά, but all in vain: he was struck by lightning.”

<sup>17</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus XXV, 4.

<sup>18</sup> e.g. Theodoret, *Historia Ecclesiastica* III, 21, 22, describing various atrocities  
revealed after Julian’s death.

<sup>19</sup> Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Theodoret, *Historia Ecclesiastica* III, 19.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, III, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Malalas, pp 333-334; and *Chronicon Paschale*, p. 552 (almost identical passages.)

<sup>23</sup> Theophanes, p. 291<sup>17-26</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153<sup>1-7</sup>. There may be some confusion here with the Emperor Valens, who  
recognized Basil’s qualities, and spared him (Theodoret, *Hist. Ecc.* IV, p. 19).

<sup>25</sup> Evagrius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* III, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> In a phrase highly evocative of the Deuteronomist historians, Zonaras wrote of  
this emperor: ἦν ὁ εὐσεβῆς τὰ πρὸς τὸν Θεόν (*Epitome* XIII 15). On the Exile, see Theo-  
doret, *Hist. Ecc.* III, p. 16 and IV, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> ἔμοι μετὰ λαοῦ τεταγμένῃ περὶ τοιοῦτων πολυπραγμονεῖν οὐ Θέμις, ὡς οὖν δοκεῖ  
ὑμῖν τοῖς ἱερεῦσι ἰαλίνεοθε (Theophanes, p. 55<sup>7-9</sup>.)

<sup>28</sup> Malalas, p. 340 and *Chronicon Paschale* pp. 558-559 give nearly identical ver-  
sions; later chronoclers abbreviated it (e.g. Cedrenus I, p. 544<sup>4-11</sup>; Glycas p. 473<sup>15-16</sup>.)  
Malalas adds a further example of Anastasius’ cruel justice, against his own wife (p.  
341<sup>1-7</sup>).

<sup>29</sup> Malalas pp. 356-357, *Chronicon Paschale*, pp. 584-585 (similar but not identical  
passages.)

<sup>30</sup> Malalas, p. 358<sup>3, 4</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> See Joseph François Villefore, “Vie d’Athénais,” in Pierre Nic. Desmolets, *Con-  
tinuation des mémoires de littérature et d’histoire* (Paris, 1726-1731), and anon., “Re-  
flexions sur l’attachement d’Athénais, impératrice d’Orient, pour Paulin, favori de l’empe-  
reur,” in *Bibliothèque raisonnée des ouvrages des Savans de l’Europe* IX<sup>2</sup> (Amsterdam,  
1732), pp. 457-468.

<sup>32</sup> J. B. Bury, *Later Roman Empire* I, p. 230 and note 2.

<sup>33</sup> See John Wortley, “The Legend of the Emperor Maurice” in the forthcoming  
*Acta of the Fifteenth International Congress for Byzantine Studies*.

<sup>34</sup> Malalas, p. 358<sup>5-6</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> However, the Eudocia commemorated at Holy Apostles on 13 August (*Synax-  
arium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, col. 890<sup>13-15</sup>) may not be the wife of Theodosius II  
(who was buried at Jerusalem,) but the first wife of Heraclius.

<sup>36</sup> J. B. Bury, *Later Roman Empire* I, p. 229.

<sup>37</sup> Malalas, p. 361<sup>15-16</sup>, p. 362<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361<sup>20, 21</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> Malalas, pp. 361, 362; *Chronicon Paschale* (pp. 599-589) attributes the story to  
Priscus of Thrace, but says nothing about the walls (the two versions vary considerably in  
detail); cf. Cedrenus I, p. 598<sup>22ff</sup>. (a mere summary) and Theophanes, p. 97<sup>15</sup> (But here the  
diocese is Smyrna!)