

## AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS AND THE LIES OF METRODORUS

The eleventh-century Byzantine compiler Cedrenus includes a unique story in the midst of his otherwise traditional and hagiographic material on the emperor Constantine.<sup>1</sup> Mentioning the outbreak of war between the Roman and Persian empires, he describes the cause of the breakdown of peace somewhat as follows. A certain Metrodorus, who was of Persian origin, went to visit the Brahmins in India to study philosophy and won the reputation of being a holy man through his asceticism. He also built water mills and baths, unknown to the Indians till that time. Having acquired this reputation, he entered the temples and took away many precious stones and pearls. He also received gifts from the king of the Indians. On his return to Byzantium he gave them to the emperor Constantine as being gifts of his own. When Constantine expressed his astonishment, Metrodorus said he had sent other gifts by the land route but that they had been detained by the Persians. Constantine then wrote a strong protest to Sapor demanding the gifts but received no reply; thus the peace was broken.

This remarkable *conte*, more appropriate to the *Arabian Nights* than to sober history, is generally supposed to be referred to in a passage in Ammianus. Towards the end of a long section commenting on the personality and achievements of Julian, Ammianus turns briefly to the question of the ultimate responsibility for the Persian War which ended so disastrously for Julian and the Roman Empire:

et quoniam eum obtreptatoribus novos bellorum tumultus ad perniciem rei communis insimulant concitasse, sciant docente veritate perspicue, non Iulianum sed Constantinum (MS. Constantium) ardore Parthicos succendisse, cum Metrodori mendaciis avidius acquiescit, ut dudum rettulimus plane.<sup>2</sup>

(The emendation Constantinum for Constantium made by Clark is universally and rightly accepted since a variety of unimpeachable sources attests the outbreak of the war in the last years of Constantine's reign.)<sup>3</sup>

Thus it would seem that in the lost portion of his history Ammianus gave an account of the origins of the Persian War attributing it to the credulity and greed of Constantine. Now, Metrodorus seems to have been a significant name to the generation of Ammianus, as there are two other seemingly independent references to him. Under the year 330 Jerome's continuation of Eusebius' chronicle, written in 380/1, about a decade before Ammianus, has *Metrodorus philosophus agnoscitur*. Metrodorus is in fact the only intellectual figure under Constantine mentioned by Jerome in that portion of the *Chronicle* which is his (after 325). A longer and more significant reference is in Rufinus' continuation of Eusebius' Church History, written in 402 or only slightly later.

Metrodorus quidam filosofus inspiciendorum locorum et orbis perscrutandi gratia ulteriorem dicitur Indiam penetrasse. cuius exemplo incitatus etiam Meropius quidam Tyrius filosofus simili ex causa adire Indiam voluit.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1. 295a–b, Bonn.

<sup>2</sup> 25. 4. 23–4.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Eutrop. *Brev.* 10. 8. 2; Aur. Victor *Caes.* 41. 13 cf. 16; *Origo Constantini* 6. 30–1; Julian, *Or.* 1. 18b.

<sup>4</sup> *HE* 10. 9.

There is of course some confusion here. The journey of Meropius, which led ultimately to the conversion of Ethiopia to Christianity, was to East Africa to which the name India had long been frequently applied, and took place under Constantius. Rufinus is, however, clear that Metrodorus is said to have gone to India proper, *ulterior*. His statement was copied, but without the hesitation implied in *dicitur*, by Socrates, followed by Sozomenus.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of the romantic colour of the story in Cedrenus there is nothing impossible in the notion of an interest in or even a visit to India by a philosopher even at this late date, when the reputation of Indian gurus had been a commonplace for over 600 years. A relatively recent and highly popular work which would have kept the notion of a visit to India alive had been Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. It would of course be possible but probably incorrect to regard the whole story of Apollonius' Indian visit as pure fiction, but such criticism was not that of the era of Diocletian and Constantine. Apollonius was an exceedingly well-known figure. Early in the fourth century the pagan polemicist Hierocles had written a book seeking to portray him as superior to Christ. Eusebius in his indignant but really quite amusing reply<sup>6</sup> includes a lot of good clean fun about Apollonius in India – not, of course, doubting the fact of the visit but criticizing many of the more absurd fables related by Philostratus, as well as the behaviour of the sage. In 333 the so-called Bordeaux pilgrim listed four *mirabilia* he had seen *en route* between Italy and the Holy Land; the tombs of Euripides and Hannibal, and the birthplaces of Apollonius and St Paul.<sup>7</sup>

The *conte* itself contains at any rate one respectable circumstantial detail, namely that there were two routes to and from India, the quicker one by sea, presumably to Egypt and used by Metrodorus on his return, and an alternative overland through Persia, which was subject to political hazards. But even if we reject, as we must, a causal connection between the losses claimed by the philosopher and the outbreak of the disastrous war, there is one interesting piece of evidence which would seem to fit the circumstances of the story so exactly that it may indeed be the basis on which it was later constructed. According to Eusebius,<sup>8</sup> about the same time as the marriage of Constantine's second son Constantius, which took place in 336, there arrived an embassy from India with gifts including precious stones. Eusebius chose to regard this as signifying that Constantine's authority was now recognized in the furthest parts of the East, but there would be nothing surprising in another embassy from India to be added to the long line from as far back as the time of Augustus Caesar. We might suppose that Metrodorus attached himself to it, or even that his visit had diplomatic purposes from the start, perhaps connected with the establishment of the Gupta dynasty which appears to have taken place during the time of Constantine. After all, only twenty years later the philosopher Eustathius was sent by Constantius to Persia in an attempt to bring the war to an end, though admittedly he was accompanied by other envoys.<sup>9</sup>

As for the date, Cedrenus puts the episode in the twenty-first year of Constantine (κα') i.e. 326/7, but this from such a late compiler can have little weight. In any case he puts the outbreak of the major attack on the Christians in Persia at this date, when it certainly began under Constantius. It may be that Cedrenus or some earlier compiler

<sup>5</sup> I. 19. 3; Sozom. 2. 24.

<sup>6</sup> In *Hieroclem*, most conveniently in vol. II of the Loeb edition of Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. On Hierocles, see T. D. Barnes 'Sossianus Hierocles and the antecedents of the Great Persecution', *HSCP* 30 (1976), 245 ff.

<sup>7</sup> *Itinerarium Burdigalense* in *Corpus Christianorum*, vol. 175.

<sup>8</sup> *Vita Constantini* 4. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Amm. Marc. 17. 5. 15; Eunapius, v. *Sophist.* 465–6. The date was 357/8.

whom he copied made a simple error and the reading should be λα', which would be 336/7 and would coincide with both the evidence of Eusebius and the year in which the war actually broke out.

Needless to say, no modern scholar has ever given any credence to the story of Metrodorus as the cause of the Persian war; there should be no reason to doubt the eminently sensible remark of Aurelius Victor<sup>10</sup> implying that the ultimate reason lay in the seizure by Diocletian of the provinces of Mesopotamia (the Alsace-Lorraine of the Persian Empire) which was bound to provoke a Persian attempt to regain them at some time or another. The view put forward by Baynes, and widely followed, that the war followed on Persian interference in Armenia rests on insecure foundations.<sup>11</sup> But the question arises in what circumstances and for whose benefit the story came into being. (The proposition that Cedrenus was following Ammianus<sup>12</sup> cannot be sustained as there is no evidence whatever of his work being known in Byzantine times, and is inherently most improbable given that few works in Latin were of any interest to later centuries in the East.) Firstly it may be observed that in the passage quoted Ammianus has evaded the criticism that Julian renewed (not began) the war by looking back to its origin. His own narrative shows quite clearly that a real opportunity for peace existed in 361. Sapor had disbanded his army (an action for which Ammianus gives no convincing explanation) at the very moment when the Roman side was at its weakest, as Constantius marched west to face Julian.<sup>13</sup> Later he reports strong criticism of Julian's renewal of the war while it was still in its preparatory stage.

quae maximis molibus festinari cernentes obrectatores desides et maligni unius corporis permutationem tot ciere turbas intempestivas indignum et perniciosum esse strepabant, studium omne in differendo procinctu ponentes.<sup>14</sup>

For future disasters such critics would naturally have held Julian responsible. It would be easy but incorrect to see in the *obrectatores* in the two quoted passages a reference to Christians. No doubt some were, but the pagan Libanius twice<sup>15</sup> refers to the hardship caused in Syria by the Persian war; the region had certainly paid a heavy price in supplying the large forces involved, not to mention the Emperor and court frequently present at Antioch. Libanius further admits that he was delighted when a Persian embassy arrived on the eve of Julian's march asking for a further embassy about peace negotiations to be received, since he believed Julian would agree.<sup>16</sup> It would seem that in spite of Julian's enthusiasm there was a feeling of war weariness, if not actual scepticism. In the event Libanius does not blame Julian for rejecting the embassy, even in the *Epitaphios*<sup>17</sup> of 365, though he did concede in the *Monodia* (slightly earlier) that in view of what followed it would clearly have been better if he had not done so.<sup>18</sup>

The origin of the story must be among those pagan elements for whom the death

<sup>10</sup> *Caes.* 39. 37.

<sup>11</sup> N. H. Baynes, 'Rome and Armenia in the fourth century', *EHR* 25 (1910), 625 ff. followed by, for example, E. Stein and J. R. Palanque, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, 1 (1959), p. 130; R. Macmullen, *Constantine* (1969), pp. 221 ff., J. Vogt, *Constantin der Grosse* (2nd ed. 1960), p. 237. I hope to deal with this problem elsewhere.

<sup>12</sup> Ensslin in *PW*, s.v. Metrodorus No. 22.

<sup>13</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 21. 13.

<sup>14</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 22. 12. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Or.* 49. 2; 17. 19; J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Antioch* (1972), pp. 162 ff.

<sup>16</sup> *Or.* 18. 164.

<sup>17</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>18</sup> *Or.* 17. 19.

of Julian was such a bitter blow. It was naturally impossible to admit that he had brought this fate upon himself through a rash and unnecessary campaign. On the contrary, the criticism of the defensive policy which Constantius had pursued with persistence and not wholly unsuccessfully for twenty years and which Julian deliberately reversed, is found in Libanius in Julian's own lifetime when it is described as cowardly and damaging to the empire, and became entrenched as a commonplace in pagan sources.<sup>19</sup> The surrender of Mesopotamia by Jovian was a further blow, in this case felt equally by Christians owing to the loss of the Christian centre of Nisibis,<sup>20</sup> and for that reason also likely to stir acrimony about the cause of the whole disastrous war. To put the blame on Constantine under whom it certainly began was an obvious emotional reaction by pagans. But even a fanatical pagan could never have argued that he should have surrendered or compromised over Mesopotamia—hence the spread of a story of a trivial and anecdotal nature which would discredit Constantine, using two aspects of his personality as pagans saw it, gullibility and greed.

The most likely candidate as a written source must be Eunapius, whose hostility to Constantine is attested in the *Lives of the Sophists* and in the pages of Zosimus who followed him closely, and whose partisanship of Julian is equally obvious.<sup>21</sup> If as seems likely<sup>22</sup> he published material on Constantine and Julian in the 370s long before his main historical work appeared, he would have been available to Ammianus, and the Metrodorus story could be added to other close parallels between Ammianus and Zosimus. Whether or not Rufinus and Jerome knew the work of Eunapius directly, it appears from their references that Metrodorus' name had become a familiar one. The later influence of Eunapius at Constantinople is traceable above all in Petrus Patricius and either independently or through him in Constantine Porphyrogennetos.<sup>23</sup> Since Photios in the ninth century seems to have seen a complete Eunapius it is not impossible that he survived even longer, but obviously Cedrenus is more likely to have excerpted from an earlier compiler—the rest of his material on Constantine is standard jejune material. The anecdote is of the type found in Eunapius' *Lives of the Sophists* but also not lacking in his historical work, to judge from Zosimus. Significant in this respect is the story of the flight of the Persian prince Hormisdas to the Roman Empire, a story with a core of fact highly mythologized by Zosimus, i.e. Eunapius—and also retailed by Ammianus in a lost book,<sup>24</sup> like the story of Metrodorus.

Zosimus, it is true, does not have the Metrodorus story, even though he is happy to reproduce other material critical enough of Constantine. Naturally we cannot say how far he abbreviated his source, but in any case the more surprising omission is

<sup>19</sup> Libanius, *Or.* 18. 206 ff. in 363. For later judgements, Eutrop. *Brev.* 10. 10. 1; *Epitome de Caesaribus* 42. 18; Amm. Marc. 21. 16. 15; B. H. Warmington, 'Objectives and Strategy in the Persian War of Constantius II' in *Akten des XI Internationalen Limeskongressus*, 1977.

<sup>20</sup> The unique nature of the loss of Mesopotamia is stressed by Eunapius, *Brev.* 10. 17; Amm. Marc. 25. 9. 11. See *PW* s.v. Nisibis for a vast range of references from Christian sources.

<sup>21</sup> On Eunapius and Zosimus, see in general the introduction to vol 1 of the edition of Zosimus by F. Paschoud (1971) but see n. 22 below. Cp. J. F. Matthews, 'Olympiodorus of Thebes and the History of the West', *JRS* 60 (1970), 79 ff. H. Hunger, *Die Hochsprachliche Profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, 1 (1978), pp. 285 ff.

<sup>22</sup> Suggested by W. R. Chalmers, 'The νέα εκδοσις of Eunapius' Histories', *CQ* n.s. 3 (1953), 165 ff.; Alan Cameron, 'An alleged fragment of Eunapius', *CQ* n.s. 13 (1963), 232 ff.; most recently, T. D. Barnes, *The sources of the Historia Augusta* (1978), pp. 114 ff. Any suggestion of Nicomachus Flavianus as a source for Ammianus and Eunapius, as Paschoud (op. cit.) maintained, should be rejected.

<sup>23</sup> Hunger op. cit. i. 301, 327 and 361 for the later use of Eunapius.

<sup>24</sup> Zos. 2. 27; Amm. Marc. 16. 10. 16 refers to the (lost) account. Zonaras 13. 5 (3. 189 Dindorf) has divergent details. See *PW* s.v. Hormisdas no. 3 (Seeck) but problems remain.

that in the whole of his account of Constantius II there is no material reference to the 20 years war with Persia. It would seem therefore that he, or rather Eunapius, had no real interest in it. Perhaps, indeed, a more practical reason than his concern for the fate of his hero Julian would have inhibited Eunapius from writing about Constantius' campaigns; we know that no less than five accounts of Julian's war by participants were available;<sup>25</sup> were there any on Constantius' war?

Finally it may be regarded as surprising that Ammianus, generally so sensible and sober, and so highly regarded by us, should have believed in the story of 'the lies of Metrodorus', especially as he was quite well aware of the importance attached by the Persians to the recovery of Mesopotamia.<sup>26</sup> This raises the question not so much of the length as of the quality of the lost portion of his work. Whatever the merits of the surviving portion. Confidence in this diminishes when it is realized that he actually the first rule to be applied to all ancient historians – he was only as good as his sources. In theory he could have used a succession of Greek writers, Dio, Herodian, Dexippus and Eunapius to cover the period from Nerva to his own times at a length approaching the surviving portion. Confidence in this diminishes when it is realized that he actually used the breviarist Eutropius and the *Kaisergeschichte* (unless Eutropius sufficed) in references to the Tetrarchy in the surviving books.<sup>27</sup> Was there nothing better at Rome under Valentinian and Theodosius? In Latin historiography probably not; yet it seems that Ammianus may have found them sufficient at any rate up to the end of the Tetrarchy and only turned to fuller sources in Greek when he approached his own time, and had to deal with the crucial figure of Constantine. For this Eunapius with all his faults was presumably more acceptable to him than what was provided by, for example, Praxagoras,<sup>28</sup> who to judge from the surviving summary was entirely panegyric, or that Bēmarchius who aroused the ire of Libanius for travelling round the east in 341 repeating a public lecture in praise of Christ and the new church at Antioch although a pagan, and who wrote on Constantine in ten books.<sup>29</sup> On Constantine's responsibility for the Persian war, one last hint may suggest why he found it a reasonable hypothesis; the only other source to take the same view was Ammianus' fellow-Antiochene Libanius<sup>30</sup> writing in 388, critical and guarded as he usually is on Constantine, but definite. The appearance of this theme in Eunapius, Libanius and Ammianus suggests that it should be added to others – for example Constantine's killing of Licinius in violation of his oath,<sup>31</sup> his execution of Crispus and Fausta,<sup>32</sup> his deplorable administrative appointments,<sup>33</sup> his greed and extravagance<sup>34</sup> – used by pagans during the fourth century to discredit the first Christian emperor.

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<sup>25</sup> Alan Cameron, op. cit. p. 334, quoting M. F. A. Brok, *De Perzische expeditie von keizer Julianus volgens Ammianus Marcellinus*. Note that two-thirds of what Zosimus has to say about Constantine is devoted to the civil wars with Maxentius and Licinius.

<sup>26</sup> 17. 5. 3 ff. when Sapor's demands in 357 specified the return of Armenia and Mesopotamia.

<sup>27</sup> R. Syme, *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Historia Augusta* (1968), p. 105 quotes 14. 11. 10 (Eutrop. Brev. 9. 24), 15. 5. 18 (Brev. 9. 26); to which should be added 16. 10. 3 (Brev. 9. 25).

<sup>28</sup> C. Müller, *FHG* iv. 2. 3.

<sup>29</sup> C. Müller, *FHG* iv. 3; Libanius, *Or.* 1. ed. A. F. Norman (Oxford, 1968), 22, 28 ff., 158 ff.

<sup>30</sup> *Or.* 49. 2 *τεθνεώτος τοίνυν αὐτοῦ τοῦ πόλεμον ἤδη πεφυτευκός*. Contrast what he has to say in *Or.* 59. 62 ff., written in 349 under the sons of Constantine, where the Persians are simple aggressors.

<sup>31</sup> Zos. 2. 28; Eutrop. Brev. 10. 6. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Zos. 2. 29; cf. Sozom. 1. 5; Julian, *Caes.* 338a–b.

<sup>33</sup> Amm. Marc. 59. 8. 12. The point was already admitted by Eusebius, *VC* 4. 54.

<sup>34</sup> Eutrop. Brev. 10. 7; Zos. 2. 38. 1; *Epitome de Caesaribus* 41. 16; Julian, *Caes.* 335b.