

Patroclus in order to introduce a homosexual element into his novel, in view of the fact that references to pederasty are veiled in it.<sup>11</sup> Rather we believe in an unconscious allusion to Homer, arising from the association of Achilles' grief with an erotic cause, and its subsequent application to the argument of the novel. In any case the upshot is that we would therefore have a new stage in the pederastic interpretation of the relationship between the two heroes in an author who is writing in the first or second century A.D.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This is the received opinion: cf. B. Effe, 'Der griechische Liebesroman und die Homoerotik', *Philologus* 131 (1987), 97; M. Brioso Sánchez, 'La pederastia en la novela griega antigua', *ExcPhilol* 9 (1999), 17, does not depart from it, but he modifies it, arguing that there is a complete silence about pederasty in Heliodorus and mere allusions in Chariton (on whom see *ibid.*, 28–30), while in the other three novelists it appears only on a secondary level. Effe (103–4) believes that the reason is to be found in a literary restriction which arises from Homer, and which the genre of the novel would later tone down. *Contra*, Brioso Sánchez, 48–9.

<sup>12</sup> On the possible dating of Chariton, see B. P. Reardon, 'Chariton', in G. Schmeling (ed.), *The Novel in the Ancient World* (Leiden, New York, and Cologne, 1996), 317, who thinks that the first century A.D. is the most probable date. Recently, E. P. Cueva, 'The date of Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe* revisited', *C&M* 51 (2000), 197–208, has offered a full discussion of the question, and favours a dating between A.D. 116 and 150.

### THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY ARE: AGATHIAS MYTHISTORICUS AND THE LAST LAUGH OF CLASSICAL CULTURE\*

Agathias is known today primarily as a historian, a title earned by his narrative of the years 552–9, replete with valuable ethnographic digressions and glimpses of intellectual life. Yet it is not clear that he viewed himself first and foremost as a historian. He presents a complex literary persona, more so, I believe, than that of any ancient or early Byzantine historian. Every aspect of this persona contributes to the structure and aims of his narrative. In Book 3, for example, he presents himself as an over-worked lawyer in Constantinople, lacking the leisure to become an accomplished scholar: his readers will have to make do with what he writes in his meagre spare time (3.1.1–7).<sup>1</sup> Yet the long account of the trial of two Roman officers, with rhetorically contrived speeches and paeans to the principles of Roman law (4.1–11), reveals the lawyer's hand. Agathias' view of justice, which shaped his moral judgement, also has a legal slant.<sup>2</sup>

\* The title of this paper was a saying of the late Seth Benardete, 1930–2001, who, more than anyone, exposed the poetry of philosophy and the philosophy of poetry. I trust that Agathias would have been an author after his own heart.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the similar complaints of Cassiodorus' in the preface of his *Variae*.

<sup>2</sup> See A. Kaldellis, 'The historical and religious views of Agathias: a reinterpretation', *Byzantion* 69 (1999), 206–52, at 220–1. For the professional background, see G. Greatrex, 'Lawyers and historians in late antiquity', in R. W. Mathisen (ed.), *Law, Society, and Authority in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2001), 148–61. The standard text is R. Keydell, *Agathiae Myrinaei Historiarum Libri Quinque* (Berlin, 1967 = *CFHB* 2). Translated passages are quoted from J. D. Frendo, *Agathias: The Histories* (Berlin and New York, 1976 = *CFHB* 2A).

There is also Agathias the poet. In the preface he presents himself not as a lawyer, but a poet and editor of anthologies, encouraged by his friends, especially one Euty-chianus, to turn to the writing of history (Preface 7–13). He approves of Euty-chianus' opinion that history and poetry differ perhaps only with regard to metre. This persona is also crucial to Agathias' work, since, in conscious opposition to the tradition, he intended to mix the charm of poetry with the serious purposes of history.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, he makes extensive use of poetic vocabulary,<sup>4</sup> quotes a number of epigrams, and alludes often to Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Euripides, and Nonnus. In fact, at one point he discreetly reveals that he knew passages of the *Dionysiaca* by heart (4.23.5). But this marriage of history and poetry was consecrated to a higher purpose, which brings us to Agathias the philosopher. In his preface he states that the purpose of history is to promote the teachings of 'political philosophy' by dressing them in pleasant garb (Preface 4–5).<sup>5</sup> This is an obvious instance of history as philosophy-teaching by example. And we find that the narrative conforms to what is stated in the preface: the overall moral aim is indebted to Plato, who is cited often and insightfully. In addition, Agathias went out of his way to tell the story of the sixth-century Platonists, whom he called the wisest men of his day (2.30–1).<sup>6</sup>

Finally, there is Agathias the scholar, who took pride in correcting the minor errors of his predecessor, the famous Procopius of Caesarea, whom he emulated and probably envied (cf. Preface 22–32, 4.26.4–6, 4.30.5). It is this Agathias, for instance, who asked the diplomat Sergius to obtain original information from the Persian royal archives (4.30.2–5).<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, to read Agathias' narrative requires constant attention to the multi-faceted persona of its author: the lawyer, who prized justice and legal arguments; the poet, who sought to charm and edify; and the philosopher, who discreetly questioned conventional beliefs while imparting moral and political lessons. Overall, this was a brilliant feat, coherent in conception and expertly executed. Unfortunately, the effect is lost on modern readers, who are interested primarily, if not entirely, in his factual reliability. Agathias is not praised for being more than a mere historian; he is blamed for being less than a good one. Every aspect of his work that does not meet modern standards is ascribed to incompetence or literary affectation. No one seems to *enjoy* it. But modern readers are not those for whom it was written. We can reconstruct the latter's education by inferring backwards from Agathias' literary allusions. To appreciate them one must know well the main Greek historians and poets (in the original, and from memory). This describes the educated élite of the sixth century far better than it does modern Byzantinists. And to appreciate the philosophical argument of the *Histories* one also has to know Plato. This may have created a narrower tier of esoteric readers even among Agathias' contemporaries, and reduces the number today to virtually nil.

I am about to complicate the picture considerably, by suggesting that some events and individuals in the *Histories* are imaginary. This will of course make the work of

<sup>3</sup> See A. Kaldellis, 'Agathias on history and poetry', *GRBS* 38 (1997), 295–305. His notion of history as non-metrical poetry in the service of philosophy may be influenced by Plato, *Republic* 380b–c, 392a–b (for Agathias and Plato, see below).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. A. Cameron, *Agathias* (Oxford, 1970), c. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 4.6.

<sup>6</sup> For Agathias and philosophy, see Kaldellis (n. 2), esp. 210, 233–4, 240–2, 246–8.

<sup>7</sup> For a good discussion, see A. Cameron, 'Agathias on the Sassanians', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23–4 (1969–70), 67–183.

historians more difficult, and will add yet another dimension to Agathias' literary enterprise.

In 553 the Alaman brothers Boutilinus and Leutharis invaded Italy with an army of Franks and Alamanni. Agathias recounts the invasion in detail, with attention to the despoiling of churches by the Alamanni (2.1.6–11). This, he says, incurred divine displeasure and led to the army's demise. We need not worry here whether Agathias actually believed in providence or thought it useful for moralizing.<sup>8</sup> It is the fate of Leutharis in particular that calls for discussion. In 554 his division was struck with the plague:

In the person of their leader the marks of divine punishment were particularly manifest. His mind became unhinged and he began to rave like a madman. . . . In a paroxysm of insane fury the wretched man actually began to eat his own limbs, fastening on to his arms with his teeth and rending and devouring the flesh like a wild beast licking clean a putrefying wound. And so feasting on his own flesh he gradually wasted away and died a most pitiful death. (2.3.6–7)

None of this really happened. Agathias has simply adapted the myth of Erysichthon, a ruthless man who cut down a tree in a grove of Demeter. As punishment, he was afflicted with insatiable hunger, which led him to eat himself in exactly the same way as Leutharis. Few versions of this myth have survived, but the similarity is undeniable.<sup>9</sup> We can even determine the exact point of transition between history and myth in Agathias, for there is a discontinuity between Leutharis' circumstances and his death. Erysichthon devoured himself out of hunger, whereas Leutharis, less plausibly, did so when his army was afflicted with the plague. Agathias could presumably not go so far as to change the plague to a famine.

What is going on? The facts have been supplanted or embellished by a mythological allusion. Certainly, Leutharis died of the plague and that by itself would serve Agathias' moral purpose. So why the invention? I doubt that he intended to deceive. It is more likely that this was a joke designed to reward the few who caught it. Agathias is *playing* with his readers. Like a merciful Saul Bellow, he is testing their classical education, though they will not know it unless they pass the test. This is a joke, therefore, that he shares with only a few of his readers, reinforcing the conclusion that the *Histories* was meant to have different levels of meaning depending on the education of its readers.

Let us consider a few more examples. The centrepiece of Book 3 is a pair of matched and obviously contrived speeches by two leading citizens of the Lazoi on the question of the Roman alliance after the murder of their king Goubazes (3.8–14). The pro-Persian position is taken by a certain Aietes, while Phartazes defends the Roman cause. But it is doubtful whether this event occurred. The setting is suspect: Agathias says that the Lazoi 'convened a secret meeting of the bulk of their nation down in a mountain gorge of the Caucasus, so that the Romans should not get wind of what they were about' (3.8.5). He thereby condenses into one dramatic event what must have been a complicated process of political manoeuvring among the Lazian élite, and, following the conventions of Greek historiography, expresses the arguments through two rhetorically elaborated speeches. The speakers themselves need not have been historical figures. We may suspect this especially since they fail to appear elsewhere. The names of Sthenelaïdas, Diotodus, and Euphemus are—given their speeches—the closest that Thucydides ever comes to a joke.

<sup>8</sup> Kaldellis (n. 2), 211–21, argues the latter.

<sup>9</sup> See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.738–878.

Aietes is obviously an invention of Agathias. His is the name of the mythical king of Colchis who opposed Jason and the Argonauts, just as the Aietes of the *Histories* opposes the Greeks of a later day.<sup>10</sup> And here Agathias does something curious: he prepares us for the allusion, by telling us in Book 2 that the Lazoi were called Colchians in antiquity and that the voyage of Jason and the Argonauts was to their country (2.18.4–5). And then in Book 3, right before the debate between Aietes and Phartazes, he refers again to the myth of the Argo, mentioning the ‘bulls with the brazen feet, the harvest of the Sown Men and all the other fabulous and incredible creations of the poetic imagination that have been elaborated around the figure of Aietes’ (3.5.3–4). How charming! This presumably includes his own Aietes. Agathias the poet has the final word here after all. His comments about the poetic imagination are tongue-in-cheek, giving an ironic twist to the belief of his friend Eutychianos that history and poetry differ perhaps only with regard to metre (Preface 12).

Another suspect tale is the death of the Frankish king Theudebert, the son of Theuderic. Agathias claims that he was killed in a hunting accident, of which he gives a very circumstantial account. He was attacked ‘by a huge bull with gigantic horns’ and thrown against a tree. A large branch broke off and struck him on the head, killing him. Yet Procopius says that Theudebert died from illness, a version corroborated independently by Gregory of Tours.<sup>11</sup> Agathias certainly knew the truth, but chose to ignore it. This is not one of his attempts to correct Procopius with inside information from foreign sources (cf. 4.30.5). It is more likely that he has again replaced history with myth. The language is poetic: the words *ταῦρος ὑψίκερως* are almost certainly lifted from Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca* 1.46, where they refer to Zeus in bull form.<sup>12</sup> Another rare word used to refer to the bull that killed Theudebert (*ύλονόμος*) also occurs in Nonnus, again in connection with a mythological bull (11.169). And the story itself is likely to be a variation on a myth, possibly the hunt for the Caledonian Boar, which was the hunt *par excellence* in ancient art and myth. Unfortunately, few written versions have survived, and most of these are condensed. Many more must have been available to Agathias.<sup>13</sup> The fullest account that we have is in Ovid, who describes the beast as ‘huge as the bulls that grassy Epirus breeds’, its tusks ‘huge as Indian elephants’.<sup>14</sup> In Ovid’s version the Boar attacks the hunters in a variety of ways, though none die in exactly the manner of Theudebert. At one point Nestor climbs a tree in order to escape, and the Boar charges its trunk.

It has rightly been said about the death of Theudebert that ‘Agathias’ account is so circumstantial, however surprising and however rhetorically treated, that it is hard to believe that he had no source for it.’<sup>15</sup> He did, but not the kind meant here. The solution lies in the classical culture shared by the intended readers of the work, and not

<sup>10</sup> Aietes receives a notice in the *PLRE*, with the provision that his ‘name is that of the mythical king of Colchis in the Argonaut legend and therefore perhaps not above suspicion’ (J. R. Martindale [ed.], *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* 3 [Cambridge, 1992], 32). Cf. D. Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity: A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia, 550 B.C.–A.D. 562* (Oxford, 1994), 308, for scepticism about the speech and the name.

<sup>11</sup> Procopius, *Wars* 8.24.6; Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* 3.36.

<sup>12</sup> Also the only passage outside of Agathias’ *Histories* where they occur together.

<sup>13</sup> J. R. March, *The Creative Poet: Studies on the Treatment of Myths in Greek Poetry* (London, 1987 = *BICS Suppl.* 49), at 29, 39. Texts include Bacchylides, *Ode* 5; Apollodoros, *Library* 1.8.2–3; Pausanias 8.45; (see below for Ovid); cf. Apollonios, *Argonautica* 2.815–34. Art: S. Woodford and I. Krauskopf, *LIMC* 6.1 (Zurich and Munich, 1992), 414–35.

<sup>14</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.281–91, trans. A. D. Melville (Oxford, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> A. Cameron, ‘Agathias on the early Merovingians’, *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Classe di lettere e filosofia* ser. 2, 37 (1968), 95–140, at 123.

in some putative Western chronicle. Agathias' version of the king's death should be placed in the same category as that of Leutharis. It is myth masquerading as history.

This blurring of history and myth should give us pause: not everything in Agathias is proffered as fact, though this will not be evident to everyone. In turn, this raises questions about the work's intended audience, then as now, and how it was designed to be read. It would be a mistake to just stick to the facts and dismiss mythological mimesis. This approach allows historians to insulate themselves from the literary dimension of their texts. But we must at least try to understand our sources before condemning them, and in the case of Agathias this means appreciating what Peter Green has called 'the self-conscious irony inevitable in a highly literate scholar-poet overaware of his literary heritage'.<sup>16</sup>

Let us then set Agathias *Mythistoricus* into his contemporary context, to view his literary practises against their cultural backdrop. It seems that he was writing around 580, when he died leaving the work unfinished.<sup>17</sup> This puts him exactly midway between Procopius and the beginning of the reign of Heracleius in 610. In a sensitive and influential study, Averil Cameron has argued that those years witnessed a profound 'process of cultural integration'. Art, literature, and imperial ceremonies were gradually consolidated around a core of distinctly Christian beliefs and images: 'classical culture quietly took a back seat. . . . Imperial historians and poets who had previously striven to keep up "classical" styles of writing now presented their subjects unblushingly within the terms of Old Testament typology.'<sup>18</sup> In the seventh century, the historian Theophylactus Simocattes could include sermons and other openly Christian material in his work.

It is the place of Agathias in this schema of transformation that I wish to contest. In a number of publications Cameron presents him as one who would have followed this trend had he but seen it more clearly. Agathias *wanted* to write as a Christian, but was only dimly aware of the implications of his own decisions, and so it was 'still too difficult' for him to break away from classical paradigms.<sup>19</sup> 'Contemporary intellectuals had not yet come to terms with themselves.'<sup>20</sup>

Is it not possible, indeed more likely, that Agathias perceived the trend clearly, but consciously opposed it? His classicism would then be a deliberate protest against the abandonment of his cultural ideals. That would explain his persistent use of classical parallels. On the first page of his preface he cites the Olympic and Nemean games—then only a memory—to illustrate his thesis about human ambition (Preface 3). On the next page he cites the command of the Delphic oracle to know oneself to explain his love for poetry (Preface 10). He digresses constantly on the ancient history and mythological associations of the cities in his narrative.<sup>21</sup> To illustrate his thesis on the divine punishment of aggressors, he cites Marathon, Salamis, and the Sicilian expedition (2.10.2–5). To ridicule the sophist Ouranius he compares him to Homer's Thersites (2.29.6), while to praise Belisarius and the soldiers who defeated the Huns he compares them to Leonidas and the Three Hundred (5.19.1–2). And this is to say

<sup>16</sup> P. Green, *The Argonautika of Apollonios Rhodios* (California, 1997), xii.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Cameron (n. 4), 9–10.

<sup>18</sup> A. Cameron, 'Images of authority: élites and icons in late sixth-century Byzantium', in M. Mullett and R. Scott (edd.), *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition* (Birmingham, 1981), 204–34, citing previous works; at 206, also 225.

<sup>19</sup> Cameron (n. 18), 225.

<sup>20</sup> Cameron (n. 4), vii–viii, also 34, 56, 134–5.

<sup>21</sup> 1.2.2 (Massilia), 1.10.2 (Cumae), 2.16.6 (Cos), 2.17.1 (Tralleis), 2.18.4–5 and 3.5.3–4 (Colchis), 5.12.2 (Sestos).

nothing about his countless allusions to historians, poets, and Plato, and his use of poetic vocabulary.

The extent and zeal of Agathias' classicism is without parallel in ancient historiography, and cannot be explained as the half-hearted language of a Christian almost ready to give it all up. He hardly gives the impression of being on the threshold of switching to biblical allusions—if only he were more with the times! It is far more likely that he was consciously moving in the opposite direction. This seems to be indicated by his self-conscious digression on the name of a town in Colchis:

Onogouris is the ancient name of the place. . . . Nowadays, however, most people do not use it. A place of worship stands on the spot and is dedicated to Stephen, the man of God who they say was the first in olden times to voluntarily forfeit his life in defence of Christian principles. . . . Consequently, it has become customary to associate his name with the place. Nevertheless, I can see no possible objection to my designating it by its ancient name and, in any case, such a practice is more in keeping with the style of historical writing. (3.5.7)

This is the polemic of a classicist obstinately opposed to contemporary trends. He is not on the verge of comparing emperors to David and patriarchs to Moses<sup>22</sup>—in fact, he never mentions the patriarchs. A single allusion to the Gospels was all he could manage, and that only in a speech (3.12.8).<sup>23</sup> Yet Agathias states that Onogouris was built in the 550s and named after a tribe of Huns (2.22.3).<sup>24</sup> This is hardly an 'ancient name'. His objection against 'new' names is perhaps not entirely sincere, for it seems that he preferred a new and barbaric name to the very classical one of Stephanus, which was only slightly 'younger'. This implies that his opposition may have been to Christian names as such.

But this leads us on to dangerous ground. The thorny question of Agathias' religion must involve his work as a whole.<sup>25</sup> His use of myth as history does not by itself prove much. Christians also used Greek mythology for similar purposes: recent studies have uncovered a pattern of structural similarities between the Gospels and Homer, and the ninth-century author of the *Life of St Philaretus* modelled a (possibly fictitious) Byzantine bridal show on the judgement of Paris.<sup>26</sup> Such use of the myths perhaps tell us less about differences between pagans and Christians, and more about the classical knowledge that we must know intimately before we attempt to read either. The current fact-finding approach to Agathias must make room for greater literary appreciation.

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<sup>22</sup> Examples from Cameron (n. 18), 232–3.

<sup>23</sup> Phartazes alluding to Matt. 16.26.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Braund (n. 10), 306.

<sup>25</sup> I have undertaken this in Kaldellis (n. 2).

<sup>26</sup> D. R. MacDonald (ed.), *Mimesis and Intertextuality in Antiquity and Christianity* (Trinity Press International, 2001), citing previous works; J. Herrin, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium* (Princeton, 2001), 132–4. Many other examples could be cited.