

IS THE MARCELLINA OF JEROME EP. 45.7
AMBROSE'S SISTER?

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IN AUGUST 385 Jerome was forced to leave Rome. His ascetic propaganda and his attacks on the *mores* of the capital had antagonized public opinion. On his departure he addressed to Asella a letter which offered a passionate vindication of his conduct. The final chapter contains the following valediction: *saluta Paulam et Eustochium—velit nolit mundus, in Christo meae sunt—, saluta matrem Albinam sororesque Marcellas, Marcellinam quoque et sanctam Felicitatem* (Ep. 45.7).

At the end of the last century Rauschen suggested that the Marcellina to whom Jerome refers in this passage may have been Ambrose's sister.¹ The idea has been repeated with varying degrees of certitude by a considerable number of scholars: it is found in Grützmacher, Ensslin, Schade, Penna, Frutaz, and Sugano.² *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* affirms categorically that Jerome is here referring to Ambrose's sister.³ Most recently Rebenich has exercised greater caution; he observes that the identification "muss angesichts der Häufigkeit des Namens offenbleiben."⁴ The aim of the present note is to adduce a piece of evidence which has hitherto been overlooked. It would seem to show that the Marcellina of Jerome's letter cannot be Ambrose's sister.⁵

¹G. Rauschen, *Jahrbücher der christlichen Kirche unter dem Kaiser Theodosius dem Grossen* (Freiburg 1897) 191.

²G. Grützmacher, *Hieronymus: Eine biographische Studie zur alten Kirchengeschichte* 1 (Leipzig 1901; repr. Aalen 1969) 227, n. 3 ("vielleicht"); 266 ("wahrscheinlich"); W. Ensslin, "Marcellina (2)," *RE* 14 (1930) 1440 ("vielleicht"); L. Schade, *Des hl. Kirchenvaters Eusebius Hieronymus ausgewählte Briefe: II. Briefband* (Munich 1937) 110, n. 1 ("wahrscheinlich"); A. Penna, *S. Gerolamo* (Turin and Rome 1949) 78 ("la sorella di Ambrogio?"); 90 ("forse"); A. P. Frutaz, "Marcellina," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 6 (1961) 1376 ("wahrscheinlich"); K. Sugano, *Das Rombild des Hieronymus* (Frankfurt 1983) 141, n. 83 ("möglicherweise").

³A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale, and J. Morris, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* 1 (Cambridge 1971) 544 (s.v. Marcellina 1).

⁴S. Rebenich, *Hieronymus und sein Kreis: Prosopographische und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Stuttgart 1992) 158, n. 90.

⁵G. D. Gordini, "Origine e sviluppo del monachesimo a Roma," *Gregorianum* 37 (1956) 220–260, at 245, alleged *en passant* that the identification was inadmissible on the grounds that Marcellina was in Milan at the time; however, Gordini failed to supply any evidence to support this assertion.

Several years earlier Ambrose had dedicated the *De virginibus* to his sister Marcellina. She is apostrophized repeatedly in the course of the work.⁶ In particular Ambrose reproduces *in extenso* the discourse which Pope Liberius had addressed to her on the occasion of her consecration as a virgin (3.1.1–3.3.14). Ambrose also takes the opportunity to lavish extravagant praise on his sister.⁷ The *De virginibus* will accordingly have been a work that was very dear to Marcellina's heart.

The *communis opinio* holds that it was only after Jerome's departure from Rome in 385 that he started to make unfavourable comments about Ambrose.⁸ It has, however, been argued recently that already in the spring of 384 Ambrose had been the target of Jerome's malice.⁹ Moreover, the work which Jerome attacks is none other than the *De virginibus*.¹⁰ Jerome's hostile remarks will have been glaringly obvious to Ambrose; they will also have been perfectly clear to his sister.¹¹ Such hostility can only have caused deep offence to both.

The farewell letter to Asella is the most sincere and candid piece of writing that Jerome ever produced.¹² The missive concludes with heartfelt and poignant greetings to his closest and most devoted disciples: Marcellina is included among them.¹³ It is incredible that Jerome should have referred

⁶ Viz., 1.3.10; 1.6.26; 1.9.54; 3.1.1; 3.4.15; 3.7.32; 3.7.37–38.

⁷ Cf. 1.9.54; 3.4.15; 3.7.37–38. The eulogy is most elaborate in the second of these passages. I have argued elsewhere (Neil Adkin, "Tertullian in Jerome [Ep. 22.37.1f.]," *SymbOslo* 68 [1993] 129–143, at 137–139) that Jerome borrows from an adjacent passage of the *De virginibus* (3.4.18–19) in the *Libellus de virginitate servanda* (Ep. 22), which belongs to his Roman period. He will therefore have been very familiar with the encomium of Marcellina.

⁸ Cf., e.g., P. Lardet, *L'Apologie de Jérôme contre Rufin: Un Commentaire* (Leiden 1993) 16–17.

⁹ Cf. Neil Adkin, "Ambrose and Jerome: The Opening Shot," *Mnemosyne* 46 (1993) 364–376.

¹⁰ Disparaging references to this treatise occur at 2.2 and 22.3 of Jerome's *Libellus de virginitate servanda* (Ep. 22); for the full evidence cf. Adkin (above, n. 9). For the date of early 384 cf. F. Cavallera, *Saint Jérôme: Sa Vie et son oeuvre* 1.2 (Louvain and Paris 1922) 24–25. It has also been argued that in the same work Jerome criticizes and attempts to outdo Ambrose's *De virginitate*; cf. Neil Adkin, "The Date of Ambrose's *De virginitate*," *Wü rzJbb* NS 18 (1992) 237–244.

¹¹ For the close relationship between Ambrose and Marcellina cf., e.g., Ensslin (above, n. 2) 1440 ("M. stand in regem Gedankenaustausch mit ihrem Bruder"). She may be presumed to have read Jerome's *Libellus de virginitate servanda*; it deals with the same subject as the *De virginibus*, which was dedicated to her. The important point should also be made that Jerome goes out of his way to link Marcellina with his strictures on this treatise: *ad sororem . . . opuscula* (Ep. 22.22.3).

¹² So J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London 1975) 114.

¹³ It is noteworthy that in the same passage Jerome makes a direct appeal to integrity of character: *et dic eis: ante tribunal Christi stabimus; ibi parebit, qua mente quis vixerit*.

in such terms to the dedicatee of a work he had assailed with some viciousness. Such behaviour is even less conceivable when the person in question was the sister of the author. The conclusion must accordingly be drawn that the Marcellina of Jerome's forty-fifth letter cannot be Ambrose's sister; scholars must cease to suggest that she was.

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