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## Some Coptic Legends about Roman Emperors

E. O. Winstedt

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## SOME COPTIC LEGENDS ABOUT ROMAN EMPERORS.

I VENTURE to call the attention of classical scholars to two legends about Roman Emperors gleaned amid the arid waste of theological nonsense which passed for literature among the Copts, in the hope that they may have better luck than I have had in tracing them to some classical source. The first is taken from MS. Par. Copte 131<sup>6</sup>, fol. 40, a single leaf of what seems to be a geographical and historical encyclopaedia.<sup>1</sup> The writer who is treating in a very discursive way of Ethiopia, states that Nero or Domitian—a strange pair to run in double harness—caused an island in the Red Sea to be watered with oil. The description of that island is mixed up with a mention of the original divisions of the Indians—a term which as usual in early days embraces both Indians and Ethiopians,—and their subsequent changes; and as that too may be of interest to students of ancient geography, I will translate the passage in full.

“Now we will speak of the position of the mountain which Nero or Domitian caused to be watered with oil. It is in the sea which is called Red on the way towards the land of India. There is a lot of difference in the Indians as people say. They were at first nine kingdoms, which are these: The Ababastroi, the Ameritai, the Axōmitai, the Adoulitai, the Bougaioi, the Daianoi, the Sabēnoi, the Dibēnoi, the Sirindibēnoi. But now they have increased, for they have separated and ceased to be connected with one another. The Dibenoi have separated from the Fish-eaters: the Sirindibinoi have separated from the Hole-dwellers: the Lentibēnoi have separated from the Eueilaioi. Of these I have spoken when I treated of history.

And this mountain which is called the Emerald place<sup>2</sup> belongs to the Romans, and is a little island by itself opposite Berenice, the place where the ships of India which come to Egypt anchor. It is distant from the shore a day's journey of a ship with a good wind behind it, that is to say 35 stadia. And Berenice is near it in the neighbourhood of Elephantine and Talmas.”

The territory here assigned to the Indians corresponds fairly with that claimed by the king who erected the Adulitic inscription and by king Aeizanas;<sup>3</sup> only it is more extensive. Their kingdoms centred round Axum and Adulis, and included land on the opposite coast of the Red Sea. That

<sup>1</sup>Mr. W. E. Crum has kindly pointed out to me, since I wrote this article, that this leaf is a fragment of the *De Gemmis* of Epiphanius. The Coptic text, of which other fragments have been published by Crum (Catalogue of the Coptic MSS. in the Brit. Mus. No. 180) and Zoega (Cat. Codd. Copt. Borg. No. 255), is very much fuller than the Greek text, and in places fuller even than the expanded Latin version.

This passage corresponds to coll. 296 (Gr. text) and 328–331 (Lat. text) of Migne's ed. of Epiphanius (Patr. Gr. 43). The whole passage about the Indians is omitted in the Greek.

<sup>2</sup>The word used is the Greek adjective *σπαργιδιον*.

<sup>3</sup>Dittenberger, *Orientalis Gr. Inscriptiones selectae* (Leipz. 1903), vol. i. Nos. 199, 200.

land consisted chiefly of the south-west corner of Arabia, where dwelt the Homēritae, or Ameritae, in the south, and above them the Sabaioi, here called Sabenoi. The Hole-dwellers, Trōglodutai, occupied the sea coast immediately south of Egypt, between Berenice and Adulis; and parallel with them inland were the Blemmues. The latter are here referred to as Bougaioi from the name of one of their tribes. The name occurs in Aeizanas' inscription in the form *Βουγαίται*, in Eriphanus as *Βούγεα*, and in the Adulitic inscription as *Βεγά*. On the latter passage Cosmas Indicopleustes, who copied the inscription in the sixth century, adds the note *τοὺς Βλέμμυας οὕτως γὰρ καλοῦσιν οἱ Αἰθίοπες* referring to the words *Ἀταλμῶ καὶ Βεγά*.

Such of the other names as are intelligible to me lie further east outside the kingdom of the Ethiopian monarchs. The Fish-eaters (*Ἰχθυοφάγοι*) inhabited the east coast of Arabia. The Sirindibenoï are no doubt the inhabitants of Ceylon, still called Serendib in Arabic. The name was known to Cosmas, a native of Alexandria, and occurs in the MSS. of his *Cosmography* in the forms *Σιελεδιβᾶ* and *Σελεδιβᾶ*. Ammianus Marcellinus<sup>1</sup> too mentions an embassy of the Divi and Serendivi to Julian: and no doubt his Divi, who are generally taken to be the natives of the Maldives, are the same as the Dibenoï of our text.<sup>2</sup> Probably the Lentibenoi should be sought in the same direction: as the ending is the same and means 'island' (Sanskrit *dwīpa*, Hindustani *dīb*).

The Eueilaioi must be the inhabitants of the region referred to in Genesis<sup>3</sup> as Eueilat or Eueila (Hebrew Havilah), concerning which Cosmas tells us *Ἐυιλὰτ ἐν τῇ Ἰνδία ἐστί*. Commentators have generally compared the name with that of the Aualitai who peopled the African coast near Bāb-el-Mandeb; though on the strength of another passage of Genesis which implies that Havilah was in Arabia, some infer that the tribe was sufficiently extensive to occupy both sides of the Red Sea, quoting in confirmation the Arabic place name *Huwailah* and Ptolemy's *Ἰνδαλα*<sup>4</sup> in the south of Yemen.

The Daianoï and Ababastroi are more puzzling. Stephanus mentions an Indian people of the name of *Δάονες*, but their position seems to be unknown, and in any case their identity with the *Δαίανοι* cannot be safely asserted. The nearest approach to Ababastroi seems to be the Alabastroi mentioned by Ptolemy and Pliny,<sup>5</sup> but whether their city was in the nome of Oxyrhynchus as Ptolemy implies or in Upper Egypt as Pliny states, it would seem rather far north for Ethiopians.

As for the island-hill itself, its position is quite definitely fixed. It was opposite Berenice, which is situated in the Sinus Immundus formed by the long peninsula called *Lepte Extrema*. And 'from the end of the cape,'

<sup>1</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus xxii., 7, 10.

<sup>2</sup> They might however be compared with the *Debae* or *Debedae* who according to Diodorus Siculus (iii. 44) were an Arab tribe inhabiting the coast of the Red Sea a little to the north of Mecca. The Latin text in one place reads *Diberii*, in

another *Dibeni*; and instead of *Lentibenoi* it has *Liberii*.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis ii. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ptol. vi. 7, 41 and Dillmann's *Genesis*.

<sup>5</sup> Ptol. iv. 5, 29. Pliny, *N.H.* v. 9, 11 and xxxvii. 8, 108. The Latin text reads *Alabastri*.

Murray's guidebook tells us, 'may be perceived the peak of St. John, or the Emerald Isle, Gezeeret Zibirgeh or Semergid, which seems to be the 'Οφιώδης, or serpentine island, of Diodorus.' The Greeks had other names for this island, 'Agathon's Island' and 'Pan's Island':<sup>1</sup> and both Agartharcides<sup>2</sup> and Strabo<sup>3</sup> say topazes were found there. Juba calls it Topazon, adding that it is 300 stadia from Berenice. Why our author should state that it is near Elephantine and Talmas, or better Talmis (modern Kalabsheh), which are both inland on the Nile, is by no means clear. Possibly, as Mr. Griffith suggests to me, the statement may be due to mistranslation of a Greek original: or perhaps it may be the only means he found of expressing that the places had roughly speaking the same geographical longitude.

That however does not in the least explain the legend of the watering of it with oil.<sup>4</sup> Again I am indebted to Mr. Griffith for pointing out to me that mineral oil is found further along the coast at Gebel-ez-Zeit (the mountain of oil); and possibly the presence of mineral oil on or near the island itself may have started the story. Certainly, if any Emperor performed the mad deed, it must have been Nero and not Domitian: but Domitian's persecution of the Christians impressed his personality so forcibly on the Copts that ever afterwards he recurs as constantly and as inappropriately in their literature as King Charles' head in Mr. Dick's petition.

Needless to say the second legend is concerned with Diocletian himself. Though his name is very frequently abbreviated in Coptic to Dioclé, we hear nothing whatever of his birth at Doclia in Dalmatia. Instead we are frequently told that he spent his youth in the Egyptian nome Psoi as goatherd to a landowner there. In the life of Apa Psote, bishop of Ptolemais, that landowner is stated to be Psote's father; while in an Encomium of St. Theodore the General he is represented as Theodore's paternal grandfather.<sup>5</sup> I fear it would be rash to infer that Theodore, who probably never existed, was Psote's nephew. In his early days, runs the legend, Diocletian was known as Agrippita, or perhaps Agrippides, as the name generally occurs when his old friend the devil addresses him in the Vocative. Moreover his habits were peculiar, and he had an uncanny way of playing on a flute which much upset the puritanical community in which he lived, especially the serious-minded Psote. When the latter found Diocletian's goats dancing to the tune of the flute, their giddy behaviour weighed so heavily on his soul that he denounced Diocletian as a servant of the devil and retired into the desert to become a hermit. Shortly afterwards a war with the Persians broke out, and the Emperor sent a recruiting

<sup>1</sup> Pliny *N. H.* vi. 33, apparently drawing his information from Juba, mentions only two islands in the Red Sea, Sapirine and Scytale. It looks as though Sapirine was another name for this island: but Ptolemy iv. 5, 35 notices as Σαπφειρηνή νήσος, which he distinguishes from Ἀγάθωνος νήσος.

<sup>2</sup> *Geogr. Gr. Min.* i. p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> Strabo xvi. 4, 6. He too calls it 'Οφιώδης.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Greek and Latin texts it was oil

turned green by preservation in copper vessels which was used to improve the colour of the stones.

<sup>5</sup> An abstract of the life of Psote is given in Amélineau's *Actes des Martyrs Coptes*. The encomium on Theodore (*Vat. Copte* 65 ff. 30-98) I hope shortly to publish myself. The story is also found in many of the martyrdoms published in Hyvernât's *Actes des Martyrs de l'Égypte*, and in the Ethiopic versions published by Pereira.

officer to Egypt. He visited Psoi, was much struck with the personal appearance of Diocletian and carried him off. If we are to believe the Coptic writers, Roman recruiting officers always were much struck with the airs and graces of some Egyptian. Exactly the same tale is told of John, the father of St. Theodore the General, and in both cases the lucky youths escaped what the Copts appear to have regarded with horror and fear, military service.

Diocletian got a post in the emperor's stables; and there he fluted away as cheerily and effectively as ever. The terpsichorean antics provoked in the king's horses attracted the attention of the emperor's<sup>1</sup> eldest daughter; and, as the levity of her heart prevented her from realising the full enormity of dancing, she was not affected in the same way as Psote. Contrariwise she formed so good an opinion of her father's graceless stable-boy that she straightway resolved to marry him; and, being a woman, she very soon got her way. On the death of her father in the wars, Diocletian succeeded to the throne.

There is very little, I fear, in this legend to claim the attention of serious historical students. Maspero<sup>2</sup> refers the legend of Diocletian's birth in Egypt to a Byzantine source; but he does not quote that source, and its existence seems at least as problematical as that of Mrs. Harris. Probably it was merely ultra-patriotism which caused the Copts to claim their worst persecutor as a native of their own land. The legend would indeed hardly be worth mentioning, were it not that in some cases it is connected with an account of the outbreak of the persecution of the Christians by Diocletian, for which rather more can be said. If one seeks in the ordinary accounts for the moving power which stirred Diocletian to undertake the persecution, the answer is short and simple; Galerius persuaded him. But if one goes a step further back and tries to find out what motive Galerius had or what arguments he used to persuade the emperor, no reasons are given save the rather inconsequential piece of information that his mother worshipped the gods of the mountains and that he himself was a blood-thirsty ruffian. Piety in a mother does not by any means prove bigotry in her son; nor is the argument that the Christians always were under suspicion sufficient reason for Diocletian's sudden change of front, unless some strong proof that suspicion was well founded could be adduced. And Diocletian was too reasonable a man to count the fact that an old lady looked to the hills from whence came her help and that her son regarded murder as a fine art a full and sufficient reason for starting a persecution. The Coptic account on the other hand does supply a more or less reasonable ground for Diocletian's action.

According to that account war broke out again with the Persians in Diocletian's reign, and in the first campaign, the Persian king's son Nicomedes was taken prisoner and entrusted to the charge of the archbishop of Antioch. The king sent messengers offering the youth's weight in gold as ransom to

<sup>1</sup> What emperor is a little doubtful. Kondelianus is the name given in the Acts of Psote, but other passages suggest Numerian.

<sup>2</sup> *Revue Critique*, Année 42, No. 41 (13 Oct. 1908), pp. 274-6.

the archbishop; but on the first occasion the matter was referred to the king and the offer refused unless the Persian king came himself and made a treaty. A second attempt to bribe the archbishop was more successful and he let the youth go secretly, giving out that he had died in captivity. Soon after his release the Persians renewed their attacks on Roman territory; and in the first battle there was the dead man fighting in the front ranks of the enemy. He was again captured, questioned, and the archbishop's treachery discovered. Diocletian questioned the archbishop who still asserted that Nicomedes had died; and, when challenged to take an oath to that effect publicly at high mass, he did so. Nicomedes was produced to refute him; and Diocletian, finding that the God whom he had previously worshipped did not punish perjury as summarily as he wished, slew the archbishop, abjured Christianity and began his persecution of the Christians.

Though I am far from asserting that events happened as here recorded, the monk's account is not entirely unsupported by history. There was war with Narses, king of Persia, in 296-297 A.D.; and, though the Romans under Galerius were badly defeated in the first year, in the second they captured not one son only but several of Narses' wives and children. The captives, we are told, were conveyed to a place of safety; and, considering the importance of Antioch, it is by no means unlikely that that place was Antioch. There is then no inherent improbability in the tale that a relative of the Persian king was entrusted to the archbishop of Antioch, and that he betrayed his trust. Nor is the little known of Cyril,<sup>1</sup> who was archbishop at the time, inconsistent with that supposition. He was imprisoned in 297 A.D., the very year in which the capture of important Persian hostages took place; and the reasons of his imprisonment are nowhere clearly stated. Of course the persecution is hinted at, but the persecution did not begin till six years later. If his imprisonment was really an unmerited foretaste of it, then one would have expected his glory to be all the greater, as one of the first of the martyrs; yet there seem to have been grave doubts whether he could be regarded as a martyr at all, though he died in prison in 300 A.D. Altogether the silence of the Christian writers who mention Cyril is suspicious; and the very unlikeliness of a libel on a church dignitary by a hagiographical writer is the strongest argument in defence of the Coptic monk's statement.<sup>2</sup> The date and the place are equally favourable. Antioch lay in Galerius' province; and, if he were hostile to the Christians, the treachery of its archbishop would supply him with the very argument most likely to win Diocletian's acceptance of his views.

E. O. WINSTEDT.

<sup>1</sup>The archbishop is generally nameless in the texts, though once or twice he is called Gaius or Acacius, neither of whom were archbishops at that date. Cyril must be intended.

<sup>2</sup>Peeters in the *Analecta Bollandiana* (xxvii. Bruxelles, 1908, pp. 69-73) regards the story as an attack on the Chalcedonian clergy, though the events took place long before the council of Chalcedon.