

Mani as the Danger from Persia in the Roman Empire

The rescript of Diocletian in March 297 to Julianus, Proconsul of Africa, is our first evidence of the official reaction to the spread of Manichaeism ¹). The same Emperor who persecuted the Christian church in the first year of the fourth century published this strongly worded edict against the Manichees. The Roman authorities were confronted with this new religion and found it contrary to their own religious convictions. Diocletian's edict will not take us very far in our understanding of the Manichees. But it is vital evidence, says Peter Brown, for his own form of Roman patriotism and for that of the officials and local notables in Africa who evidently regarded the arrival of Manichaean missionaries with horror. « As such it is a most revealing document. For it is a symptom of the increasing rigidity of the barrier that existed in the minds of the governing class of the later Empire, between 'Rome' and 'Persia'. The Manichees, as inhabitants of the open society of Mesopotamia, were caught between professedly reactionary states — the 'Romanity' of Diocletian being matched by Narseh, a man 'driven on by praise of his ancestors' ²). This rigidity increases notably at the end of the fourth century: the laws against the Manichees are repeated with increasing severity from the reign of the Emperor Valentinian I onwards » ³).

¹) Alfred ADAM, *Texte zum Manichäismus* (Kleine Texte für Vorlesungen und Übungen, 175), Berlin 1954, no. 56, p. 83, lines 2-12: „Manichaeos audivimus nuperrime veluti nova <et> inopinata prodigia in hunc mundum de Persica adversaria nobis gente progressa vel orta esse et multa facinora ibi committere; populos namque quietos perturbare nec non et civitatibus maxima detrimenta inserere: et verendum est, ne forte, ut fieri adsolet, accendenti tempore conentur <per> execrandas consuetudines, et scaevas leges Persarum innocentioris naturae homines, Romanam gentem modestam atque tranquillam, et universum orbem nostrum veluti venenis anguis malivoli inficere ».

²) LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum* IX, 5: « Narseus rex Persarum concitatus domesticis exemplis ».

³) Peter BROWN, *The Diffusion of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire* in: Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine, London 1972, p. 106.

Kaden furnishes the same description : « Diokletian, der konservative Restaurator des römischen Imperiums, der Verteidiger des alten Glaubens und Erneuerer des Kaiserkultes, heischt 'Pietät' gegenüber den Göttern Roms ». « Diokletian verfolgt die Manichäer wegen der im Manichäismus enthaltenen Apostasie vom nationalen Glauben » ⁴⁾. « Justinian endlich hat sie zu unterdrücken versucht, weil sie der Einheit des Glaubens aller Reichsangehörigen entgegenstanden, jener Einheit, deren Herstellung für ihn zwar die Erfüllung einer Mission bedeutete, die zugleich aber auch, nach seiner Überzeugung, das Unterpfand der Kraft seines Reiches und der Macht seiner Regierung gewesen ist » ⁵⁾.

The reason for the increasing rigidity is, according to a suggestion of Peter Brown, the fusing of Roman prejudice with Christian doctrinal intolerance ⁶⁾. « The Manichees, therefore, suffered a double outlawry. The Christianized Roman Empire, already chauvinistic in its attitude to Persia, now orthodox, would have little patience with 'snakes' from outside its frontiers » ⁷⁾.

« In the second century, the doctrines of Elchasai would be warmly received in Rome : here was a 'Parthian book', to be treated with awe. But it is the open world of the second century that 'stands amazed' at the Wisdom of the East » ⁸⁾. Afterwards horizons narrowed and frontiers hardened. And « to study Manichaeism is to study the fate of a missionary religion in a world of shrinking horizons » ⁹⁾.

Widengren also believes that the Iranian origin alone of Manichaeism sufficed to render the new religion a peril to imperial safety ¹⁰⁾.

The texts of the Christian theologians in the fourth century convince me that Brown's theory of the increasing rigidity must be right. He refers to Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, who mentions the Manichaean religion in his description of the history of the church. « Writing of Mani, Eusebios of Caesarea will use exactly the same

⁴⁾ Erich-Hans KADEN, *Die Edikte gegen die Manichäer von Diokletian bis Justinian* in : Festschrift Hans Lewald, Basel 1953, p. 57.

⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁶⁾ BROWN, p. 106.

⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁰⁾ Geo WIDENGREN, *Mani and Manichaeism*. Translation by Charles Kessler, London 1965, p. 118.

language as the Emperor Diocletian : a poisonous snake, entering the Roman world from barbarous Persia (*Historia Ecclesiastica* VII, 31) » ¹¹). Mani, the madman, was driven by the devil himself. He was a barbarian and tried to represent himself as Christ by saying that he was the Paraclete. And the mysterious Ambrosiaster, a man in touch with the opinions of senators in Rome, « will cite the edict of Diocletian in his commentary on St. Paul : Manichaeism is a Christian 'heresy' for him ; but it is also deeply hated as the 'new and unexpected monstrous-birth from Persia' that had disturbed conservative Romans (Ambrosiaster, *Comment. ad II ep. Tim. III*, 6 in *Patrol. latina* XVII, 52). ¹²)

In St. Augustine's writings I found likewise : « Et hic non fama de fumo est, et nescio qua fabella Persica, cui satis est aurem accommodare, et animum non subtilem, sed plane puerilem. Longe omnino, longe se aliter, non ut Manichaei desipiunt, veritas habet » ¹³).

« Et dic mihi, cui libro potius credere debeamus : eiusne apostoli, qui Christo, cum adhuc in terra esset, adhaeserat, an nescio cuius Persae, qui tanto post natus est ? » ¹⁴)

And in the same *Contra Faustum* we find the following three quotations also : « Sed videlicet vetat nos Faustus de vero Christo Hebraeis prophetibus credere, qui de falso Christo Persarum erroribus credidit » (XII, 45).

« Respondeant autem ipsi, Christi nomen unde didicerint, si a Manichaeo quomodo crediderint, ut alios taceam, homines Afri homini Persae, cum Faustus reprehendebat Romanos et Graecos vel alias gentes, si Hebraeis prophetis tamquam alienigenis de Christo crediderint » (XIII, 2).

« Et credat nescio qui ex transverso de Perside post ducentos vel amplius annos venienti et suadenti, ut illi potius, quid Christus dixerit feceritque credatur » ¹⁵).

« Sed quoquolibet nomine istud appelles, quaero abs te acuto et solerti viro, et a tuo Romano ut gloriaris ingenio » ¹⁶). « Romano » and not « Persico » !

¹¹) BROWN, p. 106.

¹²) *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹³) *De utilitate credendi* XVIII, 36 in : Œuvres de saint Augustin, 8, Paris 1951.

¹⁴) *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* XXVIII, 2, p. 739 in CSEL XXV, 1.

¹⁵) *Ibid.*, XXVIII, 4, p. 741.

¹⁶) *Contra Secundinum Manichaeum* XIX, in : Œuvres de saint Augustin, 17, Paris 1961.

« Manichaei a quodam Persa exstiterunt, qui vocabatur Manes »¹⁷).

And I read in the epistola of one of Saint Augustine's opponents : « Visus enim mihi es, et pro certo sic est, et nunquam fuisse Manichaeum, nec eius te potuisse arcana incognita secreti cognoscere, atque sub Manichaei nomine persequi te Hannibalem atque Mithridatem »¹⁸). « Depone Punicae gentis perfidiam... Quis igitur tibi patronus ante iustum tribunal Iudicis, cum et de sermone et de opere coeperis te teste convinci? Persa, quem incusasti, non aderit. Hoc excepto, quis te flentem consolabitur? Quis Punicum salvabit? »¹⁹).

We saw continually the same fusing of Roman prejudice with Christian doctrinal intolerance which lead to the barrier between Rome and Persia. Mani is the danger from Persia in the Roman Empire.

Once aware of this fact I made a lot of corrections in the books on my bookshelves. I shall mention a few of them made in some important books.

1. A commentator remarks on the quoted text of Secundinus (cp. footnote 19) : « ... quand le Manichéen romain Secundinus conjure Augustin d'abdiquer la 'mauvaise foi punique' et de revenir à la vérité, il ne fait pas mention de particularismes entre les communautés d'Afrique, de Rome ou d'ailleurs : il s'agit tout simplement de revenir au 'Perse' »²⁰).

This however is not the point. Secundinus doesn't prefer Mani to the spread Manichaean communities. He simply but fanatically states that a Persian is always to be preferred to the descendants of the country of Punic faith.

2. A commentator comments on the quoted words of Secundinus (cp. footnote 18) : « On ne s'attendait guère à voir Mithridate en cette affaire ! Mais s'il vient là ainsi qu'Annibal, c'est sans doute parce que la phrase veut dire ceci : tu t'en prends à Mani, comme Hortensius s'en prenait à la philosophie, faisant d'elle la grande ennemie — l'Annibal ou le Mithridate - des Romains. Il y aurait donc ici une allusion à

¹⁷) *De Haeresibus ad Quodvultdeum*, XLII, in P L 46.

¹⁸) *Secundini Manichaei ad sanctum Augustinum epistola* 3, R. JOLIVET and M. JOURJON, *Oeuvres de saint Augustin* 17, p. p. 514.

¹⁹) *Ibid.*, 2 and 3.

²⁰) François DECRET, *Aspects du Manichéisme dans l'Afrique Romaine. Les controverses de Fortunatus, Faustus et Felix avec saint Augustin*, Paris 1970, p. 11.

un passage de l'Hortensius. Ainsi pense Stroux, *Augustinus und Cicero's Hortensius nach dem Zeugnis des Manichäers Secundinus*, dans Festschrift Reitzenstein, Leipzig 1931, 110. Voir également P. Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin* Paris 1950, 237 » 21).

It is not necessary to be amazed when meeting Mithridates here. He is an Eastern despot and in this case perhaps even more the right man in the right place than Hannibal. They are two great traditional enemies of Rome and as such prefigurations of Mani, the danger from Persia in the Roman Empire.

3. A scholar comments on the quoted words of *De Haeresibus* (cf. footnote 17): « Sans doute ses connaissances d'Auditeur sur le fondateur de cette église semblent, à première vue, bien maigres » 22).

I don't think that St. Augustine means here to show his knowledge about Mani, but that he intends to warn against Mani as the danger from Persia. The words of Saint Augustine are merely the opposite of the headings of Mani's letters: « *Omnes tamen eius epistulae ita exordiuntur: Manichaeus apostolus Iesu Christi* » (C. Faust. XIII, 4).

4. In the long struggle between Christians and Manichees the *Acta Archelai* were often used. This book is a polemic work of Christian origin written in the second quarter of the fourth century by Hegemonius 23). The author pays attention to Mani's apparel: an azure gown; a staff of ebony in his (right) hand; a « Babylonian » book under his left arm; his legs enveloped by a pair of trousers in various colours, viz. reddish and greenish; his face and expression looking like an old Persian artist (or: physician) and like a general (XIV, 13) 24).

21) R. JOLIVET and M. JOURJON, *Œuvres de saint Augustin*, 17, p. 514.

22) DECRET, p. 10.

23) Henri-Charles PUECH, *Le Manichéisme. Son fondateur - Sa doctrine*, Paris 1949, p. 22.

24) C.H. BEESON, *Hegemonius. Acta Archelai*, Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte, vol. 16, Leipzig 1906, pp. 22, 23: « Eadem autem ipsa die adventavit Manes, adducens secum iuvenes et virgines electos ad viginti duo simul; et primo omnium Turbonem requirit pro foribus Marcelli, quem cum non invenisset, ad Marcellum ingreditur salutandum. Quo ille viso, admiratus est primo habitus indumenta; habebat enim calciamenti genus, quod trisolium vulgo appellari solet; pallium autem varium, tamquam aërina specie; in manu vero validissimum baculum tenebat ex ligno ebelino; Babylonium vero librum portabat sub sinistra ala; crura etiam braci obtexerat colore diverso, quarum una rufa, alia velut prasini coloris erat; vultus vero ut senis Persae artificis et bellorum ducis videbatur ».

A commentator says: in our opinion this passage contains several echos of genuine characteristics of the leader of the Manichaean communities. The so-called Babylonian book is most probably one of Mani's own writings which he carried with him. Mani's clothes may have been less colourful and less conspicuous, but in all probability Mani's apparel has reflected his religious dignity ²⁵).

Considering that the aim of the *Acta Archelai* was to describe Mani and his religion as unattractively as possible I am more suspicious than this commentator. The Babylonian book and the too colourful clothes reflect first of all Mani's religious and political indignity. His apparel is that which belongs to the danger from Persia. In my opinion the description is overdone.

The same commentator puts on record that a most interesting detail can be found in the expression of the *Acta Archelai*: *artifex*. This term may be translated by «artist», but in his opinion we should also keep in mind the meaning «*artifex morbi*» (i.e. physician). So the text is an echo of Mani's own words: I am a physician from the country Babylon. Moreover, the so-called Babylonian book in the hands of the physician reminds us of the Coptic Manichaica in which Mani's writings are compared with the instruments of the great physician ²⁶).

I think that the same denigration changed the description of an *artifex morbi* into an *artifex*: a physician into an artist.

5. Another scholar says about the same sentences in the *Acta Archelai*: «It is precisely the dress and accoutrement shown by two figures in the paintings on either side of the apse in the Mithraeum at Dura. They are the mythical originators of the Mithraic mysteries and therefore we have here the traditional appearance of priests of Mithras. Seeing that this was the garb Mani wore, the *Acta* justifiably called him a priest of Mithras (*Acta Archelai* XL, 7). An enigmatic coin inscription from Characene in southern Babylonia is in Mandaean script and probably reads, 'Mani, the Appointed of Mithra'. Again the link between Mani and Mithras!» ²⁷)

I am doubtful concerning the words «seeing that this was the

²⁵) L.J.R. ORT, *Mani. A religio-historical description of his personality*, Leiden 1967, p. 176.

²⁶) ORT, p. 177.

²⁷) WIDENGREN, p. 36.

garb Mani wore». Mani lived 216-276 (77) and presumably the *Acta Archelai* were written in the period of 325-350. «Seeing»?

My second difficulty comes when the scholar himself says: «But are we really to suppose that Mani obtained from the Great King the privilege of striking coins, normally reserved for his satraps? If such was the case he would have been invested with magisterial position at Mesene, headquarters of the Mandaean movement. The puzzle of this Characene coin probably still awaits solution and the whole problem seems baffling»²⁸). In fact I have come to reject completely the importance of the coin mentioned above, following the explanation of Scheftelowitz. This author describes that from the little Kingdom of Characene a number of coins descending from the first century have been found. They are furnished partly with Greek legends and partly with Mandaean ones. On two coins with Mandaean legends two quite different persons, of which one is named Mani, have the same epithet consisting of three words which can be differently interpreted. Perhaps these three words, as they are also added to another person than Mani, can mean only a kind of title, which according to Lidzbarski (Zschr. f. Numismat. 1921, 92 sqq.) were used independently of Mani, so that it is very dubious altogether whether the name «Mani» on the coins signifies the founder of Manicheism. This title (ustād ī muhr) could mean «master of the seal-mintmaster». In India the meaning of pers. muhr is «a golden coin» (Vullers, Lex. II 1237). The name of the mint-master is also often on Roman coins (Dressel, Ztschr. f. Numism. 33, 31). Scheftelowitz' conclusion is: Thus Reitzenstein's idea that on the coins Prophet Mani is designated as «substitute of Mithra» is untenable²⁹).

I conclude that the coin from Characene can't be the link between Mani and Mithras. Again, I consider the link to lie in the intention of the *Acta Archelai*. This book wants to show Mani as the danger from Persia.

6. A French scholar points at three descriptions of Mani: «La description qu'en font les Actes d'Archélaüs et qui a été rappelée tout à l'heure, l'image que donne de son visage, orné d'une longue barbe tressée, un cachet Manichéen récemment découvert à la Bibli-

²⁸) *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁹) J. SCHEFTLOWITZ, *Is Manicheism an Iranian Religion?* Part I in *Asia Major* I, (1924), pp. 484, 485 footnote 7.

othèque Nationale de Paris, la face glabre et, avec sa barbiche clair-semée, de type très chinois que prête à Mani une peinture de Tourfân, sont vraisemblablement conventionnelles » ³⁰).

In my opinion it is wrong to place the description of the *Acta Archelai* next to the Manichaean pictures, because it is not a conventional but it is a polemic one.

7. Another book points out that it is striking to see that in the Coptic Manichaica Mani is not supposed to have mentioned his native country. « The reason for this omission is -in all probability- that the 'Western' Manichaeans were not so very interested in Mani's native country. Their intentions were mainly fixed upon the contacts with the Christians of their days. Therefore we hear that Mani's words with relation to his forerunners are concentrated on Jesus Christ, 'our Lord' » ³¹).

As far as I am concerned I think that the Manichaeans had one reason not to stress the native country of Mani. They would have made anti-propaganda in the Roman Empire if they had used the expression: Mani Persicus, or Mani the physician from Babylon. That regards *Kephalaia*, Stuttgart, p. 15, lines 27-31 as well as p.186, lines 25-36.

I have the same observation with regard to: « Behold, the two ways have parted. The Apostle of Light has achieved this work in the country of the... of Babylon in the years of the kingdom (?) of Persia » (Manichäische Homilien, edited by H. J. Polotsky with contribution of H. Ibscher, Band I, Stuttgart, 1934, p. 29, lines 8-11). This text may refer to Babylon as Mani's native country. If this is true, however, we have to admit that it is a very covert allusion. Therefore we are more inclined to state that those lines describe Mani's work as a preacher. The achievement of the parting of the two ways ('this work') does not refer to Mani's birth, but to Mani's effect as a religious leader » ³²).

The same observation applies also to: « The Coptic Homilies contain an extensive description of Mani's sufferings and death. In this story we come across two references to Babylon in relation with Mani. The first passage runs as follows: '...Apostle of this generation,

³⁰) PUECH, p. 35.

³¹) ORT, p. 103.

³²) *Ibid.*, p. 103.

In Westen
kleine gewollte
Ablesung von
pers. Ursprung?

when he was to leave the world, the great Apostle of the country of the great Babylon' (Manichäische Homilien, p. 54, lines 13-15). In our opinion this text may refer to Babylon as Mani's native country, but those words may also allude to Babylon as the place where Mani did his work as an Apostle. The second passage appears in a part of the text in which Mani is praised. Here we read : 'The Apostle, who has ...the Apostle of all generations, who has come,... the preacher of life. The interpreter of the country of the great Babylon' (Manichäische Homilien, p. 61, lines 14-17). Again it is not quite clear in which sense the term 'interpreter of the country of the great Babylon' is used. Both Mani's origin and his activities may be meant by the author of the Coptic Homilies. This involves that we cannot come to convincing conclusions on account of the two passages in the Coptic Homilies»³³). Nowhere in the Coptic Manichaica we learn that Babylon was Mani's native country³⁴).

(Verständnis
des
persischen
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(gen. d. g. oder
subjektiv))

I have given seven examples of corrections which I have made in the books on my shelves. I imagine that one can add to these examples. The situation of the Christian *Acta Archelai* and the Coptic Manichaica are made clearer. The intentions of the opponents in the anti-Manichaean struggle appear to be different from our former opinions. And last, but not least: implications are involved in respect of the computation of the dates in Ancient History.

Let me furnish one example of those chronological implications. I read : « ...en 302 les Manichéens, quoiqu'en dise l'Edit, n'eussent pas été poursuivis parce que leur doctrine était venue de la 'Perse ennemie'; mais, pour des motifs uniquement religieux, ils eussent encouru les mêmes peines qui, l'année suivante, accableront les chrétiens. Il aurait fallu croire à un programme de poursuites mûrement conçu et réalisé par étapes contre les ennemis de la religion professée par les empereurs, que ceux-là fussent chrétiens ou Manichéens. En 297, au lendemain de la révolte de l'Egypte, où les Manichéens ont été surpris dans le rôle d'agents au service des Perses agresseurs de l'Empire, leur affaire prend un tout autre aspect »³⁵). « C'est bien un procès de tendance qu'on lui fait, et que seules les circonstances

³³) *Ibid.*, p. 104.

³⁴) *Ibid.*, p. 105.

³⁵) W. SESTON, *De l'authenticité et de la date de l'édit de Dioclétien contre les Manichéens* in : *Mélanges de philologie, de littérature et d'histoire anciennes offerts à Alfred Renout*, Paris 1940, pp. 350, 351.

et, comme l'a écrit N. H. Baynes 'la psychologie de guerre' peuvent expliquer. S'il n'y avait pas eu en Égypte la révolte d'Achilleus qui révéla aux autorités romaines que les Perses se servaient des Manichéens pour susciter des révoltes dans l'Empire, si le Sassanide Narsès ne s'était pas ^{notre} jeté sur la Syrie, les communautés manichéennes n'auraient pas cessé de jouer des ^{nullité - avertissement} *otia maxima* favorables à leur propagande » ³⁶).

Compare this conception with that of Widengren: «Manichaeism was indeed in the West always regarded as a religion belonging to that Persian people which was ever hostile to the Romans, *adversaria nobis gens*, as Diocletian phrased it » ³⁷). And you'll prefer this last opinion in spite of the ^{absurdité} exaggeration included in the word «always». For different reasons this will not prevent us from accepting the year 297 from the other author in the meantime.

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³⁶) *Ibid.*, p. 352.

³⁷) WIDENGREN, p. 118.