

AN EARTHQUAKE AT CONSTANTINOPLE: AUGUSTINE'S *DE EXCIDIO URBIS* VI.7

In his sermon *De Excidio Urbis* Augustine tells a fascinating story concerning events at Constantinople which happened a few years previous to the sack of Rome on 24 August 410¹. His confidence in the accuracy of the story as he told it was such that he referred his audience to people among themselves who were present at the events which he describes². Hence his story is worthy of serious consideration. It is the purpose of this note to establish a date for the events which he describes, and to set them thereby within their proper political context³.

According to Augustine, during the reign of Arcadius God wished to terrify the people of Constantinople, to cause them thereby to see the errors of their ways and change accordingly. Thus he revealed to a faithful servant of his, a military man, that the city was going to be destroyed by fire from the sky. This soldier told the bishop, who in turn told the news to the people as a whole. The whole city did penance much as Nineveh had done it long ago. Nevertheless, so that the people might not think that they had been tricked by the soldier, God sent a fiery cloud (*ignea urbes*) on the appointed day. It approached gradually from the East, flame descended from the sky, and there was an accompanying smell of sulphur. Not only did people flee to the church seeking baptism, but they were baptised in the streets and squares also, forcing anyone they could find to perform the rite for them. The cloud slowly departed, but a rumour then arose that the city would be destroyed on the following Sabbath. The people left the city, including even the emperor himself, and waited and prayed several miles away. They saw smoke appear suddenly over the city, and gave a great cry. Messengers were eventually sent to the city, they reported back

¹ *De Excidio Urbis Romae Sermo* [=DEU]; CCL 46,249-262; cfr. 258-259.

² DEU VI.7.240-241; CCL 46,258, the aside: *audiunt quod dico nonnulli forsitan qui noverunt et sunt in hoc populo, qui et illic praesentes fuerunt*.

³ F. VAN DER MEER, *Augustine the Bishop*, London, 1961, p. 613, attributes this event to 398, quoting as his authority in this matter O. SEECK, *Die Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt*, V, Berlin, 1895, p. 305, appendix 563, which neglects, however, the chronographic sources here discussed.

that everything seemed to be safe, and the people returned there once more. God had accomplished his purpose, causing them to repent by this salutary fright.

The emperor Arcadius, during whose reign these events took place, died on 1 May 408⁴. He had been proclaimed Augustus as a child on 19 January 383⁵. However there can be little doubt but that Augustine has in mind here the period after the death of Theodosius I on 7 January 395, when Arcadius became the sole ruler in the East⁶. Therefore we have in mind here the period 7 January 395 - 1 May 408. It is of little help in this matter that the events in question took place while Arcadius was in Constantinople. He spent the whole of his reign there apart from one or two short summer trips into Asia Minor⁷. In order to proceed any further in this matter we need to examine our records for the occurrence of any other unusual phenomena at Constantinople during the period 395-408.

Let us consider the chronographic works first. The chronicle composed in Latin by Marcellinus Comes at Constantinople during the early part of the reign of Justinian I contains the following entries of interest:

- 396 *Terrae motus per dies plurimos fuit caelumque ardere visum est.*
 402 *Constantinopolim ingens terrae motus fuit.*
 408 *Romae in foro Pacis per dies septem terra mugitum dedit.*

The early 7th century *Chronicon Paschale* is also of use to us in our task⁸. Of unusual phenomena it records a shower of hail like stones at Constantinople in October 404, an earthquake with thunder and lightning at Constantinople in the first watch of night of 1 April 407, and again on 5 July 408 another earthquake with thunder and lightning. If Augustine's story has its origins in events surrounding an earthquake at Constantinople, a not unreasonable suggestion, then it would seem that we must at least consider four possible dates: 396, 402, 407, and 408.

The first point to be made is that the *Chronicon Paschale* does not

⁴ SOCRATES [=Soc.], *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI.23.7; PG 57,729-731. MARCELLINUS COMES [=Marcell. Comes], *Chronicon* s.a. 408; PL 51,922.

⁵ Soc. V.10.5; PG 67,583. Marcell. Comes s.a. 383; PL 51,919.

⁶ Soc. V.26.4; PG 67,653-656. Marcell. Comes s. a. 395; PL 51,920.

⁷ On the whereabouts of Arcadius, O. SEECK, *Regesten der Kaiser und Päpste für die Jahre 311 bis 476 n. Chr.*, Stuttgart, 1919, p. 285-315.

⁸ *Chronicon Paschale*, ed. L. DINDORF, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, Bonn 1832. An English translation and commentary has been produced by Michael and Mary WHITBY, *Chronicon Paschale 284-628 AD*, Liverpool, 1989. However there is no reference whatsoever to the incident described by Augustine in its notes to the various earthquakes and other phenomena of the period under discussion.

specifically attribute the earthquake of 408 to Constantinople. This entry looks suspiciously like an exaggerated and somewhat misleading reference to the earthquake at Rome in 408. Otherwise if its date, 5 July, is correct, then it lies just outside the period which we are here examining. Therefore we ought rather to focus our attention on the year 396, 402, and 407.

The reference to the thunder and lightning which accompanied the earthquake of 407 at Constantinople is encouraging. The occurrence of a storm suggests the cloud which Augustine mentions, the lightning is reminiscent of his account of flame descending from the sky, and the smell of ozone which accompanies such lightning suggests the unusual smell, sulphur it is alleged, to which Augustine also refers. However the most interesting aspect of the earthquake of 407 is the time of its occurrence. It is specifically stated that it occurred during the first watch of the night. Augustine states that the fiery cloud approached Constantinople *noctis initio tenebrante iam mundo*. This is hardly a coincidence. It would seem, therefore, that the evidence suggests that Augustine describes events surrounding the earthquake of 407.

Our investigation does not end here, though. The statement by Marcellinus Comes of the earthquake of 396, *caelumque ardere visum est*, is also highly reminiscent of Augustine's description of a fiery cloud. It is interesting too that Marcellinus should specifically state that the disturbance went on for several days. Augustine's story would seem to imply the evacuation of Constantinople for several days. Nor does the evidence of Marcellinus stand alone. The poet Claudian began his first work against the eunuch Eutropius on his accession to the consulship of the East in 399 with a catalogue of other (as he saw it) monstrous portents. Among these he counted the occurrence of 'blood-red threatening storm clouds'⁹. This is surely confirmation of the unusual phenomenon which Marcellinus Comes describes. It seems, therefore, that some sort of unusual cloud formation really did occur over Constantinople in conjunction with an earthquake in 396, and this would seem to match closely the phenomenon described by Augustine¹⁰.

⁹ Vv. 5-6 \ ... *nimboque minacem \ sanguineo rubuisse Iovem* ... \, the translation from the Loeb text of M. PLATNAUER, Cambridge (Mass.), 1956, p. 139.

¹⁰ PHILOSTORGIUS [=Philos.], *Historia Ecclesiastica* XI.7; PG 65,601-602, describes a confusing list of portentous events - a comet, disease, famine, earthquakes, hailstones - in such a manner that it is not possible to date any of them properly. It may be of some significance, though, that his reference to the earthquakes precedes his reference to a fall of hailstones of incredible size, an event which our sources agree - Soc. VI.19.5; PL 67,721-724. *Chronicon Paschale* - took place in 404. As the comet appeared in 389-390 - Philos. X.9; PG 65,589-592. Marcell. Comes s. a. 389; PL 51,919. *Fasti Vindobonenses*

There are strong reasons for identifying the curious phenomenon described by Augustine with both the earthquake of 407 and that of 396. However it is not simply a matter of preferring one earthquake to the other. The question that ought to be asked at this point is whether any earthquake occurred at all in 407? As the earlier source, Marcellinus Comes, contains no mention of an earthquake in 407, but would seem to be supported in its assertions of such an event in 396 and 402, while the later source, the *Chronicon Paschale*, makes no such claims for either year, the natural suggestion would seem to be that the earthquake of 407 is none other than that of 396 or 402 misplaced.

Unlike the earthquakes of 396 and 402, for both of which there is reliable independent confirmation, no such testimony exists in the case of the earthquake of 407¹¹. It has been assumed in the past that a letter of Nilus of Ancyra¹² (d. 430) confirms the occurrence of an earthquake in 407¹³. In this letter addressed to the emperor Arcadius Nilus states that he will not pray for relief from the earthquakes then troubling Constantinople until the exiled John Chrysostom is restored. The reference is assumed to be to the exile of Chrysostom from June 404 to his death in September 407, and this is tied in with the earthquake of 407. However there is a danger of circular argument here. The correspondence of Nilus is a mess, and many of the letters are demonstrably late forgeries, often

Priores, ed. T. MOMMSEN, *Monumenta Germaniae Historiae Auctorum Antiquissimorum* XI, Berlin, 1894 - its appearance at the head of his list suggests that Philostorgius has retained the proper chronological sequence of the source which he was using in this matter. That he described earthquakes between an event of 389/90 and an event of 404 would seem, therefore, to imply also that an earthquake really did occur in 396. As Philos. XI.7; PG 65,601 refers back specifically to Philos. X.9; PG 65,589-592 it is clear that he does not have in mind here the reference to a comet in 400 by Soc. VI.6, PG 67,677 and SOZOMENUS [=Soz.], *Historia Ecclesiastica* VIII.4; PG 67,1524. The very existence of such a comet must be questioned. We only have Socrates' word for it, as Sozomen is dependent on Socrates, and since he does not provide a precise date for it in his usual manner - by day, month and consulate - it may be that he merely intended to say that the comet of 389 had originally warned of the events of 400. It is sign of desperation, surely, to drag a Chinese calendar into this matter as has J.H.W.G. LIEBESCHUETZ, *Barbarians and Bishops: Army Church and State in the Age of Arcadius and Chrysostom*, Oxford, 1990, p. 258.

¹¹ In the case of the earthquake of 402 there is *Ep.* 61 of SYNESIUS OF CYRENE, PG 66,1404-1405, which refers to an earthquake in Constantinople at the time of his departure thence for Cyrene again. The traditional date of this departure, 402, has recently been defended by J.H.W.G. LIEBESCHUETZ, *Why did Synesius become Bishop of Ptolemais in Byzantium* 56 (1986), 180-195.

¹² *Ep.* 265; PG 79,336.

¹³ B. CROKE, *Two Early Byzantine Earthquakes and their Liturgical Commemoration*, in *Byzantium* 51 (1981), 122-147; p. 124.

compilations from the works of the contemporaries of Nilus. The statement by the *Chronicon Paschale* that an earthquake occurred in 407 has been used to argue that the letter in question here is genuine, i.e. the entry of the *Chronicon Paschale* was simply assumed to be correct in itself¹⁴. Thus we cannot here argue that the letter of Nilus shows the *Chronicon Paschale* to be correct. More importantly, though, it is possible to advance a completely different interpretation of the letter of Nilus.

Let us turn to the ecclesiastical history of Theodoret. He tells of an exile of Chrysostom by Arcadius which was revoked by the emperor himself, and the subsequent return of John to Constantinople¹⁵. This exile would seem from his story to have dated to 403, and, true enough, Chrysostom was exiled and recalled in 403¹⁶. However it is the reason for this recall which is of interest to us. According to Theodoret there had been earthquakes at Constantinople, the empress had been frightened, and Arcadius decided to recall Chrysostom. However we know from our other sources that the reason for the recall was completely different. There had been some accident in the imperial bedroom (the empress Eudoxia had a miscarriage, it is now thought) which the imperial couple interpreted as a sign of anger by God that his bishop had been exiled, and acted accordingly. Theodoret's story of the earthquakes is demonstrably false. The letter of Nilus which connects the exile of Chrysostom with earthquakes clearly belongs to the same tradition. It is clearly a fiction, although it is open to question whether it was contrived directly from the account of Theodoret or from the source which Theodoret himself used.

As has been shown there is no independent testimony to the occurrence of an earthquake in 407 as alleged by the *Chronicon Paschale*. In the circumstances the assumption must be that the earthquake of 407 is really a misplaced description of one of the earthquakes of 396 and 402. But which one?

Let us assume the *Chronicon Paschale* has correctly preserved the day and the month of the earthquake which it describes even though it does attribute it to the wrong year. This date, 1 April, is of vital importance. It falls directly within the period covered by the shifting of Holy

¹⁴ A. CAMERON, *The Authenticity of the Letters of St. Nilus of Ancyra*, in *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 17 (1976), 181-196; p. 187.

¹⁵ THEODORETUS [=Theod.], *Historia ecclesiastica* V.34; PG 82,1261-1266.

¹⁶ Interpreted as a reference to 403, for example, by G. DOWNEY, *Earthquakes at Constantinople and Vicinity, AD 342-1454*, in *Speculum* 30 (1955), 596-600; p. 597. On the chronology of the deposition of Chrysostom, J.H.W.G. LIEBESCHUETZ, *The Fall of John Chrysostom*, in *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 29 (1985), 1-31; esp. p. 15-16 for what follows.

Week each year. Great significance was placed on any unusual event that occurred during this week. The *Chronicon Paschale* specifically records, for example, that the earthquake of 417 occurred on Good Friday. The historian Orosius Paulus blamed the later success of Alaric and his Goths on the fact that they had been forced by the Roman forces to join battle at Pollentia on Easter Sunday 402¹⁷. If the earthquake whose notice the *Chronicon Paschale* preserves had occurred during the Holy Week then this fact would have been duly noted. It is unthinkable either that such a fact, once noted, would have been deliberately omitted from the notice at any stage in its tradition. We must conclude, therefore, that the earthquake in question belonged to a year in which 1 April did not fall within the Holy Week. During the part of the reign of Arcadius which we have been considering, 1 April fell within Holy Week on four occasions, 397, 400, 402, 405¹⁸. Thus we must identify the earthquake in question as that of 396 rather than 402.

The facts as we have established them are as follows: Augustine describes events accompanying the occurrence of earthquake; his description matches closely the description of the earthquakes of 396 and 1 April 407; the earthquake of 407 is really a misplaced description of that of 396. The most reasonable interpretation of the evidence would seem to be that Augustine describes events which occurred in connection with an earthquake on 1 April 396.

Augustine describes the events which occurred in conjunction with an earthquake of 1 April 396, a Tuesday. We can therefore identify the bishop who proceeded to take advantage of this natural event, and claim it as the divine punishment with which he had presumably been threatening the people of Constantinople for some time. He was Nectarius, a native of Tarsus and senator of Constantinople before he was chosen to be bishop there in 381¹⁹. He died the year after the earthquake, on 27 September 397, when he was succeeded by John Chrysostom²⁰. Chrysostom was himself replaced by Arsacius on 26 June 404²¹. However Arsacius died on 11 November 405, to be replaced by Atticus four months later²². Thus there were four orthodox bishops in rapid succession during the reign of Arcadius, and only the proper dating of events described by Augustine can

¹⁷ PAULUS OROSIUS, *Historiarum adversus paganos libri VII* VII.37; CSEL 5, 536-542.

¹⁸ According to the tables of O. SEECK, op. cit., 1919.

¹⁹ Soz. VII.8; PG 67,1433-1436.

²⁰ Soc. VI.2; PG 67,661-664.

²¹ Soc. VI.19; PG 67,721-724. *Chronicon Paschale* s. a. 404.

²² Soc. VI.20; PG 67,725-726. Soz. VIII.27; PG 67,1589-1592.

allow us to identify correctly the bishop in question.

Who was the soldier to whom, it was claimed, God had revealed himself? There is no firm answer to such a question. However it is erroneous to claim that he was necessarily a 'high-placed officer'²³. A soldier of the ranks, seemingly, had the audacity in 394 to claim that he had received a vision promising victory to Theodosius in his forthcoming battle with the forces of the usurper Eugenius. This vision was reported by the soldier's commanding officer to his superior, and so-on until it reached all the way up the chain of command to the ear of the emperor himself²⁴. God, it would seem, was no respecter of rank. The same may very well be true of the case which we have been discussing here.

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²³ As described by F. VAN DER MEER, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

²⁴ Theod. V.24; PG 1249-1254.