

## **PHILOSTORGIUS' ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY: AN 'ALTERNATIVE IDEOLOGY'**

**Alanna M. Nobbs**

The genre of ecclesiastical history, started by Eusebius, flourished particularly in the Greek-speaking areas of the Roman Empire from the fourth to the sixth centuries. Its leading practitioners after Eusebius are held to be Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret, all writing (more or less) from an 'orthodox' standpoint, and all three fortunate so far as their reputation has been concerned because their ecclesiastical histories have come down intact, or almost so. While modern scholars by no means accept all their assertions and conclusions, theirs is the overall view of Church history which has prevailed.

Yet a tantalising glimpse of an 'alternative ideology',<sup>1</sup> which might have prevailed had the Athanasian party not triumphed over the Arians, has been preserved tenuously in the fragments of the historian Philostorgius, who wrote probably shortly before Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret and from an Eunomian, or neo-Arian standpoint. When he wrote, probably in the early 430s, the genre of ecclesiastical history was still developing,<sup>2</sup> and Eusebius, branded even in his own day and certainly afterwards as an Arian sympathiser was the model for Philostorgius, a model which he adapted, as will be shown, to give his History its individual stamp.

In order to understand the nature of Philostorgius' work, and how he contributed his own slant to the development of

---

<sup>1</sup> The phrase is used by Peter Heather & John Matthews, *The Goths in the Fourth Century* (Liverpool, 1991), 133. I am grateful for being shown the text in advance of publication.

<sup>2</sup> I have argued this case more fully with reference to the dates of composition of the ecclesiastical histories in 'Philostorgius' Place in the Tradition of Ecclesiastical Historiography', *Tradition and Traditions, Prudentia* suppl. (forthcoming), D.W. Dockrill & R.G. Tanner (edd.). Fifth-century modifications to the genre are well discussed by Jill Harries in 'Patristic Historiography', *Early Christianity, Origins and Evolution to 600 AD*, Ian Hazlett (ed.) (SPCK, 1991) 269-79.

ecclesiastical history, it is necessary to look closely at his life and background, especially as it is generally unfamiliar to those who do not have access to the detailed account in the German edition of Bidez/Winkelmann. In view of this unfamiliarity, and of the frequent neglect of Philostorgius even in some of the otherwise standard treatments of ecclesiastical history,<sup>3</sup> it is necessary to give a résumé of what we know of about him.

### I. His Life and Times

He is known from references in his work, as preserved by Photius. He tells us exactly where he came from and what his family background was (*HE* ix.9), information modern scholars would dearly like to have about other later antique historians such as Ammianus. He came from Borissus in Cappadocia, a region which in the fourth century gave rise to a number of leading Christian figures such as Basil, the two Gregories, Ulfila and Theophilus. Philostorgius further recounts that his grandfather, Anysius, was a priest of 'orthodox' homoousian views who had four sons and a daughter, Eulampia. She, who was to become Philostorgius' mother, married a follower of the neo-Arian, Eunomius. He persuaded her to abandon her homoousian views and to adopt his own—whereupon she won over her father and brothers, and clearly brought up her son strongly in the same mould! One other small glimpse of his family background may, perhaps, be perceived from his name. The name Philostorgius means loving or affectionate, and the words *στοργή* is used particularly of family affection. It may not be too speculative to see him as the product of a close-knit family, since he introduces them into his narrative and clearly pursued his interest in theology from the Eunomian standpoint throughout his life.

He was born c. 368. This is inferred from his claim in *HE* x.6 to have seen Eunomius in Constantinople when he (Philostorgius) was twenty. Of his studies and learning there is no doubt, though the view is usually taken that he was not a

<sup>3</sup> For instance, he does not appear in G. Chesnut, *The Earliest Christian Histories* (Paris 1977).

cleric.<sup>4</sup> However, his deep interest in theology is apparent throughout his ecclesiastical history, where several quite detailed theological explanations have survived the 'Photian filter'—the process of excerpting Philostorgius to Photius, who was hostile to his theological beliefs. It is clear that he read widely, to judge from the number of authors cited or alluded to in his work.<sup>5</sup> This inference may also be drawn from Photius' comments on his style, which suggests that he was trained in rhetoric. In *Bibl. Cod.* 40, Photius records:

'His style is elegant, his diction often poetical, though not to such an extent as to be tedious or disagreeable. His figurative use of words is very expressive, and makes the work both pleasant and agreeable to read . . . the language is variously embellished, even to excess.'

Philostorgius' interests may also be deduced from two other works of his, which are alluded to in the *HE*—an encomium of Eunomius and a refutation of the anti-Christian writer Porphyry.<sup>6</sup>

About his studies not much more can be said with certainty, but one crucial point has not been brought out in previous accounts. His *Ecclesiastical History* is the work of his old age—whether he was born in 368 or even a little earlier. He is writing as an old man, looking back in disappointment at the crushing of the Eunomian party. In this respect, we may make some comparison with Ammianus Marcellinus, writing in Rome towards the end of his life and seeing his hopes for the reign of Julian and what he represented not only extinguished by Julian's death but crushed by the succeeding emperors, in particular Gratian and Theodosius I. To Ammianus, however, as the 380's and early 390's progressed, *nemesis* must have seemed increasingly impotent. Unlike Ammianus, Philostorgius can lay claim to a certain satisfaction. He records what he believes to be the wrath of God descending on his contemporaries, and becoming increasingly apparent during the reign of Theodosius II. The final sections of his work are

<sup>4</sup> F. Winkelmann, revision of Bidez' edition of Philostorgius (hereafter cited as Winkelmann), 3rd ed. (GCS, Berlin 1981) cviii and n. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Winkelmann, cxxxiv ff.

<sup>6</sup> Philost. *HE* iii.21, x.10.

apocalyptic in tone<sup>7</sup> and register the portents and signs of the impending disaster to which Philostorgius believes Theodosius II to have doomed the Roman empire (by crushing the Eunomian party).

We cannot be certain exactly how old Philostorgius was when he wrote but since he was born c. 368 (some have argued for an earlier date, c. 364),<sup>8</sup> he was probably in his mid-60s when his *HE* was written. His work is most plausibly dated in the early 430s, though recently a date in the late 430's has been proposed.<sup>9</sup> Philostorgius looks back, therefore, with a long perspective on his subject matter. In his view of the imminent wrath of God we may detect the impotence of one whose temporal hopes were not realised.

Some other aspects of his life may be gleaned from his writings. It has already been noted that he says he visited Constantinople at the age of twenty. Certain references in the work may indicate that he spent part—or possibly most—of his life in the city.

During his time in the capital, he would have had opportunities to observe the leading political figures of the day. His personal descriptions of Rufinus and Arcadius may well incorporate an eyewitness account, e.g. xi.3 (of Rufinus) ‘. . . the quick glance of his eye and his ready tongue showed him to be a man of ability’.

We may perhaps detect, in the manner of presenting the details concerning the Eunomian party at Constantinople that Philostorgius was writing as one of them - for instance at xii.11, where he tells of the departure of Eunomius' nephew Lucian from the rest of the Eunomian party. Another example of a Constantinopolitan perspective may be seen in the portents Philostorgius lists from the time of Theodosius II.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> I have developed this argument in 'Philostorgius' View of the Past', in *Reading the Past in Late Antiquity* G. Clarke et al. (edd.) (Sydney, 1990) 261-3. Cf. Philost *HE* xii.9: 'these strange and unprecedented calamities . . . are sent down on humanity as scourges of Divine wrath'.

<sup>8</sup> Winkelmann, cvi.

<sup>9</sup> F.M. Clover, 'Olympiodorus of Thebes and the *Historia Augusta*', *H.A. Coll. Bonn 1979-81* (1983).

<sup>10</sup> Philost. *HE* xii.8.

Philostorgius may not, however, have resided continuously in Constantinople. At some point or points, he clearly travelled. Whether as a consequence of this or as a cause, he was, like his near-contemporary Philip Sidetes, extremely interested in geography. This interest is expressed after the classical Greek manner which went back to Herodotus, but which was still a lively tradition among classicising or secular historians (Ammianus and Olympiodorus, to name just two of Philostorgius' older contemporaries). One example of such a classical type of *topos* is his interest in the foundation and/or naming of cities (e.g. vii.11 and 14, where he discussed the origins and name of Jerusalem):

'the city of Jerusalem itself was formerly called Jebus, and was inhabited by some tribe of Benjamin before King David took it by the aid of Joab ... He then built a new city on the same site and chose it as the metropolis of the entire Hebrew race'.

While the way he expresses his interest in geography is much after the fashion of classical historians, the historical background on which he draws in this instance is the Old Testament. Several of his other geographical pieces, however, are pure digressions which in terms of their interest and subject matter could have been derived from a classical historian. Like Ammianus, for instance, Philostorgius describes the Succian Alps.<sup>11</sup>

His interest in geography is linked, after the Herodotean fashion, with a taste for ethnography. Again, comparably with Ammianus, he describes the origin of the Huns. A passage where Philostorgius does give us his own eyewitness account is at vii.3, where he speaks of his viewing of a statue at Paneas (Caesarea Philippi). He demonstrates a considerable and detailed interest in the Jordan river, as well as a more general one in Mesopotamia (and the Garden of Eden). On the basis of his references especially to Jerusalem and the Jordan, it has been plausibly suggested that his visit to Palestine may have been in the course of a pilgrimage.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Philost. *HE* iii.4 ; Ammianus xxi 10.3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Winkelmann, cix.

## II. His Ecclesiastical History

So much for Philostorgius' life. We pass now to consider the nature of his work before judging his alternative ideology.

The *Ecclesiastical History* is the third composition of Philostorgius of which we know. He had already shown, no doubt, his rhetorical ability and his theological interests when he wrote his encomium of Eunomius and his refutation of Porphyry, to both of which he alluded in his *HE*.<sup>13</sup> From this we can see, too, more of the significance of the choice of ecclesiastical history as a genre, and as a work of Philostorgius' maturity.

The *HE* existed in twelve books, which were discovered in two lots by the ninth-century patriarch Photius. Photius wrote in his *Bibliotheca* ('Library') a summary of much of his reading, excluding very popular books, ostensibly for his brother.<sup>14</sup> In doing so he has preserved for us records of many works which no longer exist, or are quite fragmentary. It has been remarked<sup>15</sup> that 'Photius must have read more classical literature than anyone else has been able to do since his day'.

Photius actually wrote twice (and apparently independently) about Philostorgius. In his *Bibliotheca*, among his 280-odd summaries, he includes the information (Cod - 40) that he had read Philostorgius' twelve books of ecclesiastical history. He notes that, as a literary conceit (not uncommon in the fourth and fifth centuries) each book began with a letter of the author's name. Thus Philostorgius (whose name has twelve letters in Greek), was able to introduce his name via his writings. Photius says '... soon afterwards, six other books were found in another volume, so that the whole appears to have filled twelve books. The initial letters of each book are so arranged that they form the name of the author'.

The crucial role played by Photius in the preservation of Philostorgius is the result not of the *Bibliotheca* entry but of a separate summary he made of the *HE*. This epitome keeps the book divisions and would appear to preserve some of the

---

<sup>13</sup> n. 6 above.

<sup>14</sup> W.T. Treadgold, *The Nature of the Bibliotheca of Photius* (Washington, D.C., 1980) 118-68.

<sup>15</sup> N.G. Wilson, *Scholars of Byzantium* (Baltimore, Maryland, 1983) 99 ff.

structure of the original since book divisions are given, thus enabling the few fragments which have survived from other sources to be hypothetically located. The excellent edition of Bidez, as revised by Winkelmann, shows how the parallel passages from other sources (such as the Passion of Artemius, the Suda, Nicephorus, etc.) can be juxtaposed with Photius and indicates where they share common vocabulary, presumably directly of Philostorgian origin.

We do not have any other comparable summaries by Photius, and may only speculate as to the nature of the epitome we possess. It seems likely, however, that they were Photius' reading notes (of the kind students used to write before the days of photocopying) setting down both the main arguments of the original, and dwelling on the passages which Photius found most interesting, such as the geographical passages and the descriptions of exotic animals. Photius may, quite apart from the intrinsic interest of some of Philostorgius' subject matter, have had a particular incentive to read his work. As patriarch, Photius gave a series of homilies on the Arians<sup>16</sup> in which he dwelt on fourth-century church history. It may well be that we have here lecture notes or sermon notes, and that he accompanied his reading of the text for the homilies with jotting down other points of interest.

One result of the way Photius wrote his epitome is that while we can more or less see the structure and arrangement of Philostorgius' original work, we have no idea of its scale. Photius wrote at length on the sections which interested him, copying at great length and at times probably verbatim, to judge from a few cases where the first person in the text clearly refers to Philostorgius rather than Photius. The outstanding example of this is the long section already alluded to in book iii, on exotic animals including the zebra and the unicorn. Photius copied down and preserved for us Philostorgius' own rationalisations of Greek myths e.g. iii.11: 'it seems to me that the Greeks must once upon a time have seen this animal (a type of ape) and, amazed at the strangeness of its appearance, have adopted it as a god . . . this they clearly did in the case of the

<sup>16</sup>C. Mango (ed.), *The Homilies of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople*, Dumbarton Oaks Studies HI (Cambridge, Mass., 1958).

satyr'. Photius also preserves Philostorgius' rationalisation of Oedipus and the sphinx.<sup>17</sup> Other passages which must have appealed to Photius, and are preserved at length, are the disquisition on the location of the Garden of Paradise (iii.9-10) and the founding of Constantinople (ii.9). Thus, in a few places, we may feel that we have something of the 'real' Philostorgius. This is especially the case where two or more fragments from different sources coincide. Where the verbal similarities are such as to suggest the original language of Philostorgius, the edition of Bidez/Winkelmann prints them in bold type. From this and from Photius' comments in the *Bibliotheca*<sup>18</sup> we can gain some impression of Philostorgius' style.

On the other hand, Photius profoundly disapproved of Philostorgius' theological stance, namely his support for the neo-Arian Eunomius. Some extracts, in consequence, are so far from being *verbatim* as to be almost entirely judgmental, e.g. iii.21 'The impious Philostorgius says that he wrote an encomium in praise of Eunomius, and he does not blush to admit it! At other times, Photius puns in an amusing manner on Philostorgius' name, calling him 'Kakostorgius' - i.e. 'evil affection'. The pun loses its force in English as it is very hard to reproduce, so has to be translated by some phrase such as 'the wicked Philostorgius'. Photius imposes what has been called an 'orthodox filter' on the theological views of Philostorgius. Thus he disapproves, naturally, of Philostorgius' hostile view of Athanasius. This can give a bizarre effect, at times, where the narrative is clearly out of focus with Photius' presentation, as at ii.11: 'the imperious contriver of lies (i.e. Philostorgius) says that the divine (Photius' word, no doubt!) Athanasius appeared in the church'.

Nevertheless, Photius has preserved—whether directly or incidentally—some very valuable traditions represented in Philostorgius. It is possible to reconstruct some of the polemical issues of fifth-century historiography from even a brief notice given by Photius. For instance, both Christian and pagan historians were concerned to establish the cause of

---

<sup>17</sup> Philost. *HE* iii.11.

<sup>18</sup> See above p. 273.

Constantine's conversion. The pagan version preserved in the later fifth or early sixth-century historian Zosimus<sup>19</sup> attributes Constantine's conversion to his need for absolution after murdering his son by his first marriage, Crispus, together with his second wife Fausta. Where Photius introduced Philostorgius' account, which gives the more or less traditional Christian view of the vision before the battle of the Milvian Bridge, he does so with the words 'the *cause* (αἰτία) of the conversion'. This may well reflect the contemporary polemic.

Thus the alternative ideology of Philostorgius is preserved, at times reluctantly and at times unwittingly, by Photius, who was aware that his author *was* writing ecclesiastical history but also aware that its spirit was different from that of most other ecclesiastical histories. Photius remarks dismissively in his Introduction to the epitome: 'The history itself was written as an encomium on the heretical party and an attack and assault upon the orthodox, rather than a history'. We should not, however, interpret these remarks in a manner that would deny Philostorgius his place in the development of the tradition of ecclesiastical historiography but rather note that he seems to have been recognised as an exponent of the genre by its later practitioners, in that they needed to answer his views.

In Philostorgius, then, we find a 'mirror image' of the orthodox view of Church history. Theodosius I and Theodosius II are not the pious emperors, whose efforts are rewarded by God. Instead, Constantius II, criticised by pagans and orthodox writers alike, seems to have received the only 'good press' he got in antiquity in the pages of Philostorgius, and that despite the filter of Photius. The Arians Ulfila and Theophilus are praised by Philostorgius who emphasises the process of Christianising non-Roman peoples in the time of Constantius.<sup>20</sup>

### III. His Ideology

What legacy, and what features of alternative ideology did Philostorgius leave behind? For answer, we can look not only to his own work but to the efforts of his more

<sup>19</sup> Zosimus, *Historia Nova* ii.29.

<sup>20</sup> Philost. *HE* ii.5-6.

orthodox successors, Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret, to reply to and counteract his interpretations.

In Books XI and XII of Philostorgius' *HE* there is a preponderance of secular events over ecclesiastical ones. While the first ten books show, even via Photius, mainly an ecclesiastical interest (centering round the Arian dispute), with a certain proportion of secular interest, Philostorgius changes to recounting mostly secular events in his last two books. It has been suggested above that the reason for this is probably his unwillingness to record the defeat of the Arians, whose fate was sealed from the time of Theodosius I. There seems little doubt that he used Olympiodorus extensively in these last two books, as he concentrates mainly on the western, secular events which formed the particular concern of Olympiodorus. Where eastern events are mentioned for the early fifth century, Philostorgius' tone is apocalyptic. Thus he gave rise to a picture of Theodosius II's time which needed to be answered. Sozomen dedicated his work to Theodosius II and secured his imprimatur,<sup>21</sup> Sozomen's presentation of the history of the Church from Constantine's reign thus not only revised and made more official the ground covered by Socrates but clearly demonstrated who had imperial favour and who did not. Philostorgius could never have hoped for, nor would he indeed have wanted, the imprimatur of an emperor who crushed the Eunomian party.

It would seem likely that Philostorgius' presentation of the Arian view of fourth and early fifth-century history constructed an alternative ideology which needed to be answered. Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret all in their individual ways—and from an anti-Arian standpoint—may well have been responding to this challenge. For instance, Philostorgius' sections in praise of Aetius and Eunomius must have presented a challenge to the orthodox. Socrates devotes a chapter to the denigration of each.<sup>22</sup> A similar case is Philostorgius' disparagement of Athanasius (which we can detect only in-so-far as it has survived the transmission via Photius). Socrates (*HE* ii.3) stresses Athanasius' popularity on

<sup>21</sup> Sozomen's address to the emperor is a prelude to book 1 of his *HE*.

<sup>22</sup> Philost. *HE* iii.15. Soc. *HE* ii.55, iv.7.

his return from exile, and describes him as 'most joyfully received by the people of the city'. Philostorgius has left a sour note in reporting this same event (Phil. *HE* ii.18): 'he went straight to the church, without any regard to those who had opposed him'. Chrysostom is given only grudging praise by Philostorgius, who highlights Ulfila and Theophilus as well as Aetius and Eunomius as Christian heroes.

All such instances should of course be seen not merely in the light of the surviving histories, but in the light of the on-going polemic between the Athanasian and Arian/semi-Arian and neo-Arian groups. Athanasius' own writings, and the works to which they refer, provide ample testimony of the fourth-century conflicts. Both sides had their own collections of documents and their keen protagonists. Since not as much has survived from the Arian side, the glimpses we can catch via Philostorgius are all the more valuable.

The importance of the presentation of the past to the concept of the security of the empire should not be underestimated. Both sides believed that a pious emperor was rewarded by God, while God showed his displeasure through devastating natural phenomena, defeats in battle, etc. For the orthodox, Theodosius I and Theodosius II are the pious emperors whose reigns are marked by divine favour; for Philostorgius, both these reigns are signalled by natural disturbances. The otherwise-maligned Constantius II, in the Philostorgian version, is given a particularly lengthy treatment. From the 'mirror image' of emperors and of heroic Christian leaders we can retrace the polemic of the day and see how both sides strove to make their presentation of the past (from Constantine onwards) into the accepted one. However tempting it is to look back with hindsight and accept the dominant picture, we need to consider the alternative view represented by Philostorgius and those of like mind. Only by doing so can we understand the real issues which were at stake.