

## NICAGORAS OF ATHENS AND THE LATERAN OBELISK\*

ONE day in the year 326 of our era Nicagoras, torch-bearer of the Eleusinian mysteries, made his way unsuspectingly past the buried tomb of Tutankhamun in the Valley of the Kings near Thebes, and climbed towards the entrance of the tomb immediately above it. Though it had itself long since been robbed, the making of Ramses VI's sepulchre had at least produced a generous scree, to which Tutankhamun owed his current oblivion and future fame. Scrambling cautiously over this, and the accumulation of sand and stones in the tomb's entrance,<sup>1</sup> Nicagoras followed his dragoman down a long corridor. We can tell from its thick encrustation of graffiti that this tomb was by far the most popular with visitors; and Nicagoras's practised guide knew exactly what appealed to the different sorts of people who made up his clientèle. Learning that the Athenian was a priest, and a cultured man with philosophical interests, he made a point of stopping in front of a scene which shows the soul standing before Osiris, the god of the dead, thanks to which this tomb is sometimes called the 'Tomb of Metempsychosis'.<sup>2</sup> Enthused by the images, and by his guide's explanation of their meaning, Nicagoras paused and wrote in ink, in an empty space on the tableau, the following words:

Ὁ δαδοῦχος τῶν ἀγιωτάτων Ἐλευσίνι μυστηρίων Μινουκιανοῦ Ἀθηναῖος ἱστορήσας τὰς σύριγγας πολλοῖς ὕστερον χρόνοις μετὰ τὸν θεῖον Πλάτωνα ἀπὸ τῶν Ἀθηνῶν ἐθαύμασα καὶ χάρι(ν) ἔσχον τοῖς θεοῖς καὶ τῷ εὐσεβεστάτῳ βασιλεῖ Κωνσταντίνῳ τῷ τοῦτό μοι παρασχόντι.<sup>3</sup>

I, the torch-bearer of the most holy mysteries at Eleusis, the son of Minucianus, and an Athenian, examined the burial-vaults many years after the divine Plato from Athens, and admired them, and gave thanks to the gods and to the most pious emperor Constantine, who has granted me this.

On the opposite wall of the corridor we find, curiously enough, a similar graffito:

Κωνσταντίνῳ [Σε]β(αστῷ) τὸ Ζ̄ καὶ Κωνσταντίῳ Καίσα(ρι) τὸ Ᾱ ὑ[π]ἄτοις.

Ὁ δαδοῦχος τῶν Ἐλευσινίων Νικαγόρας Μινουκιανοῦ Ἀθηναῖος ἱστορήσας τὰς θείας σύριγγας ἐθαύμασα.<sup>4</sup>

In the seventh consulship of Constantine Augustus, and the first of Constantius Caesar.

I, the torch-bearer of the Eleusinian (Mysteries), Nicagoras, the son of Minucianus, and an Athenian, examined the divine burial-vaults, and admired them.

This graffito differs from the first in several significant respects. It ignores the rule of hieronymy; it uses an incorrect designation for the Eleusinian Mysteries;<sup>5</sup> and it is in a much less polished hand. But it is in the first person. So far no explanation has been produced for this curious situation. It is worth noting, though, that the proportion of written rather than scratched graffiti in these tombs is not high enough to compel the rather improbable assumption that visitors normally went armed with pen and ink; so it may well be that the guides kept these items available, and encouraged visitors to make use of them, for a small fee. In any case, those for whom it was beneath their dignity or beyond their ability to write the message themselves will have had the guide do it for them, naturally in the first person.<sup>6</sup> Hence the banality and repetitiousness of most of the graffiti, and the solecisms and inelegance of Nicagoras's. Ill-pleased

\* An earlier version of this note was read to the Societas Graeca et Latina, Groningen University, in November 1985. I am obliged to D. R. Jordan for some acute remarks about the Theban graffiti.

<sup>1</sup> J. Baillet, *Inscriptions grecques et latines des Tombeaux des Rois ou Syringes à Thèbes* (Cairo 1920–6) 222.

<sup>2</sup> A. Piankoff, *ASAE* lv (1958) 160.

<sup>3</sup> Baillet (n. 1) no. 1265.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 1889.

<sup>5</sup> For these two points see K. Clinton, *The sacred officials of the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Philadelphia 1974) 64–6.

<sup>6</sup> Third-person graffiti might be written by members of important people's entourages (e.g. Baillet [n. 1] nos. 1380–1), but not by guides.

with his guide's effort, he provided, and perhaps himself wrote out, a new version, strikingly personal in tone.

The interest of a visitor of Platonist proclivity in the 'metempsychosis' scene was natural enough. Nicagoras was not unique, as is shown by the unusual frequency of allusions to Plato at this point in the tomb.<sup>7</sup> It is also worth recalling that Porphyry had not so long ago included in his *De abstinentia* a translated Egyptian prayer, similar to *Book of the Dead* §125, concerning precisely this juncture in the soul's history.<sup>8</sup> What one would like to know more about is the extent to which the native Thebans themselves were still in touch with their religious traditions. Our information about priestly learning and knowledge of the hieroglyphic script at this late period<sup>9</sup> gives no ground for optimism. Nor need we be impressed by a guide's ability to identify so obvious a scene from the old mythology. Yet it can hardly have been coincidence that the tomb most visited at this period was also the one whose theological compendiousness continues to stand out amidst the voluminous documentation about Egyptian views of the afterlife. Perhaps there were still priests or even guides capable of expounding this doctrine to the curious visitor. But was Nicagoras merely a curious visitor? Several scholars have wondered for what purpose this typical representative of the oriental pagan Establishment, offspring of a cultivated and influential Athenian family descended from Plutarch of Chaeronea,<sup>10</sup> was travelling in Egypt at the expense of the Emperor Constantine. It is generally held that he had been asked to report on the state of the old religion in Egypt, and that odd jobs of this sort made pagan Athenians feel wanted, and so loyal.<sup>11</sup> The present note will try to improve on this rather feeble solution.

Beginning no doubt after his conquest of the Balkans from Licinius in 317, Constantine certainly did court the oriental pagan élites, albeit intermittently. He will have been well aware that this was not a constituency likely to be pleased by the foundation of Constantinople, or impressed by the spectacle of their emperor engrossed in doctrinal horse-trading with the fathers assembled at Nicaea. Hence his allocation, for example, of a free annual wheat-allowance to Athens,<sup>12</sup> a major centre of pagan intellectual life that had long been used to others providing for its material needs. Athens had already elected Constantine hoplite general, according him a statue with fulsome inscription;<sup>13</sup> and, probably in the late 20s or early 30s, a young pagan Athenian called Praxagoras wrote a flattering account of his rise to power.<sup>14</sup> At court in Constantinople, it was whispered that Iamblichus's pupil Sopater had gained the emperor's ear, and aspired to convert him to philosophy—but a Christian plot brought him to a sticky end.<sup>15</sup> The two sides eyed each other suspiciously; and though it was clear enough which way the

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 1255, 1263, 1266, 1279, 1281.

<sup>8</sup> Porph., *Abst.* iv 10.

<sup>9</sup> G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes. A historical approach to the late pagan mind* (Cambridge 1986) 63–5.

<sup>10</sup> F. Millar, *JRS* lix (1969) 16–18. Pace S. Follet, *Athènes au II<sup>e</sup> et au III<sup>e</sup> siècle: études chronologiques et prosopographiques* (Paris 1976) 281 n. 4, it may not have been the same Nicagoras who recorded his visit to the Cave of Pan on Mount Parnes on *IG* ii–iii<sup>2</sup> 4831. That this Nicagoras neither observes hieronymy nor proclaims himself a torch-bearer does not necessarily preclude identification with the Theban Nicagoras, since his visit to the Cave of Pan may have occurred before he entered office; but his allusion to his father as having been *dadouchos* is not confirmed by anything we know either of Minucianus or of Mnesaeus, the father of the Theban Nicagoras's homonymous grandfather. Since the inscription (of which there is a photograph in *AE* [1918] 214) could well be fourth-century, it seems reasonable to assume that its author was our Nicagoras's son (in which case one would restore Νικαγόρας [ἀνέθηκεν ὁ Νικαγόρου τοῦ δ]αδοῦχῆσαντος υἱὸς τοῦ

θεοῦ) or, more probably, his grandson. The Theban Nicagoras, if he had indeed been in office since at least 304 (Clinton [n. 5] 66), will not have been so young in 326 that we need project his (grand)son's *floruit* very much further into the fourth century.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. J. Baillet, *CRAI* (1922) 282–96; id. (n. 1) 489–92; P. Graindor, *Byzantion* iii (1926) 209–14; A. Bataille, *Les Memnonia: recherches de papyrologie et d'épigraphie grecques sur la nécropole de la Thèbes d'Égypte aux époques hellénistique et romaine* (Cairo 1952) 172–3; T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass. 1981) 211. R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (Harmondsworth 1986) 640–1, advances the diverting suggestion that Constantine sent Nicagoras in search of the phoenix, in order to teach the philosophers of Athens 'the truth about life after death'.

<sup>12</sup> Jul., *or.* i 8cd.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* On the hoplite general, and his responsibility for the grain-supply, see D. J. Geagan, *The Athenian constitution after Sulla* (Princeton, N.J. 1967) 18–31.

<sup>14</sup> Phot. *Bibl.* 62.

<sup>15</sup> Eun. *V. Phil.* vi 2.

political wind was blowing, Constantine avoided aligning himself too conspicuously with the Christians.

Late in 324, after Licinius's final surrender in September and the foundation of Constantinople in November, Constantine set out to visit his newly-acquired eastern provinces.<sup>16</sup> Early in 325 preparations were in hand for a visit to Egypt; and by Easter, according to a recent reconstruction, Constantine had arrived at Antioch. It is not impossible that he went on as far as Palestine; but he himself confessed that he found the prospect of direct involvement in the Arian dispute then raging in Egypt so repugnant that he decided to turn back.<sup>17</sup> By May he was at Nicaea. Nonetheless, Constantine had seen something of Egypt as a younger man, travelling with Diocletian in 301/2;<sup>18</sup> and he maintained an interest in the country. One aspect of this interest is alluded to by Ammianus Marcellinus, in his account (xvii 4) of how, in the year 357, Constantine's son Constantius made a gift of a Theban obelisk to the city of Rome.

The Obelisk of Constantius, or Lateran Obelisk, so called because in 1588 it was re-erected in the Piazza S. Giovanni in Laterano by Pope Sixtus V, is the largest surviving specimen, measuring now 32.15 m, and originally about a metre more.<sup>19</sup> It was quarried at Aswan by Thutmosis III and erected at Thebes (Karnak) by Thutmosis IV, in the first instance between the fifth and sixth pylons of the great temple of Amun, and subsequently between the temple's rear wall and the eastern gate of the sacred enclosure, on the axis of the sanctuary. It was, unusually, a single obelisk, not one of a pair; and it was a major cult-object, the focus of its own small temple. Augustus, who adorned Rome with other obelisks, left this one where it stood because, according to Ammianus, 'it was consecrated as a special gift to the Sun God, and because, being placed in the sacred part of his sumptuous temple, which might not be profaned, there it towered aloft like the summit of the whole'. And Ammianus continues his narrative as follows:

But Constantine, making little account of that, tore the huge mass from its foundations, and rightly thought that he was committing no sacrilege if he took this marvel from one temple and consecrated it at Rome, that is to say, in the temple of the whole world. He let it lie for a long time, while the things necessary for its transport were being provided. And when it had been conveyed down the channel of the Nile and landed at Alexandria, a ship of a size hitherto unknown was constructed, to be rowed by three hundred oarsmen. After these provisions, the aforesaid emperor departed this life, and the urgency of the enterprise waned . . .<sup>20</sup>

Obelisks think nothing of lying around for decades or centuries while mere mortals think what to do with them. They are a challenge to the resourcefulness even of emperors. To understand the immensity of the task Constantine had embarked upon, one has only to read the breathtakingly exciting story of how in 1586 the somewhat smaller obelisk that now stands in the Piazza di S. Pietro in Rome was removed from its earlier home, only about 255 m away, and re-erected in front of the new St Peter's. Even Michelangelo had resisted repeated attempts to persuade him to undertake the job, enquiring always: 'E se si rompesse?'<sup>21</sup> So it is not at all unlikely that Constantine had already planned the removal of the Theban obelisk before 324,<sup>21a</sup> as a demonstration of his power and authority, and set about having it lowered to the ground soon after that date. If by 337 it had got as far as Alexandria, that, at any rate from the obelisk's

<sup>16</sup> Constantine's movements are documented by T. D. Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge, Mass. 1982) 76; and cf. Lane Fox (n. 11) 638–43, 654.

<sup>17</sup> Eus. *V. Const.* ii 72.2: σπεύδοντι δὴ μοι ἤδη πρὸς ὑμᾶς [sc. Alexandria] καὶ τῷ πλείονι μέρει σὺν ὑμῖν ὄντι ἢ τοῦδε τοῦ πράγματος ἀγγελία πρὸς τὸ ἔμπαλιν τὸν λογισμὸν ἀνεχάτισεν, ἵνα μὴ τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ὄραν ἀναγκασθῆιν, ἀ μὴδὲ ταῖς ἀκοαῖς προαισθῆσθαι δυνατὸν ἦγούμην.

<sup>18</sup> Barnes (n. 16) 41–2.

<sup>19</sup> P. Barguet, *ASAE* I (1950) 269–80; and id., *Le temple d'Amon-Ré à Karnak: essai d'exégèse* (Cairo 1962)

223–42; E. Iversen, *Obelisks in exile* I (Copenhagen 1968) 55–64.

<sup>20</sup> Amm. Marc. xvii. 4.12–14 (tr. Rolfe, with adjustments).

<sup>21</sup> Iversen (n. 19) 27–38. On still-visible evidence of the lowering process at Thebes, see Barguet (n. 19) 271.

<sup>21a</sup> Perhaps he had been told about it by Diocletian, who may have known Thebes well: M. El-Saghir *et al.*, *Le camp romain de Louqsor* (Cairo 1986) 21, 29. On Diocletian's taste for things Egyptian see M. Malaise, *Les conditions de pénétration et de diffusion des cultes égyptiens en Italie* (Leiden 1972) 449.

point of view, will have seemed like indecent haste. And after Constantine's death another twenty years were to elapse before the great monolith was at last erected on the *spina* of the Circus Maximus at Rome. The occasion was Constantius's triumphal visit to Rome in 357<sup>22</sup>—as was proclaimed by Latin hexameters carved on the obelisk's new granite base.

Constantius's inscription is now lost; but it was carefully recorded at the end of the sixteenth century. It began as follows:

Patris opus munusqu[e suum] tibi, Roma, dicavit  
Augustus [toto Constan]tius orbe recepto,  
...  
Hoc decus ornatum genitor cognominis urbis  
esse volens, caesa Thebis de rupe revellit.<sup>23</sup>

His father's achievement and benefaction Constantius Augustus, when the whole world had been recovered, bestowed on you, O Rome . . . His parent, wishing this ornament to adorn the city that bears his name, cut and tore it from the Theban rock . . .

The meaning is plain enough: Constantine intended the obelisk for Constantinople, the New Rome; Constantius now bestows it on the Old. Ammianus's assertion that Constantine planned to send the obelisk to Old Rome is flatly contradicted. Pope Sixtus V, in the inscription carved in 1588 on the last of the obelisk's series of bases, preferred Constantius's version of the story to the later literary account;<sup>24</sup> and many modern scholars have followed him.<sup>25</sup> After all, Constantine was notorious for plundering the holy places of the East to embellish his new capital. Why should he have made an exception for such a spectacular object as this?

But it is not necessarily reasonable to prefer a contemporary inscription to a literary source produced only a few decades after the event, without enquiring further into the character of each. The inscription is a public declaration by an emperor who had recently recovered the West from a usurper, and who was attempting to impress and reconcile a capital city threatened by a rival, Constantinople, and dominated by a senatorial class parts, at least, of which Constantius had just gravely affronted by removing the altar of Victory from the Senate House.<sup>26</sup> The fact that the obelisk had been in limbo for up to three decades before its re-erection made it especially tempting for Constantius to fudge his predecessor's intentions, so as to present his own benefaction in a yet more favourable light. As for Ammianus's account, it comes from the pen of a man whose authority is not to be dismissed lightly. It has been suggested that he depends here on a senatorial source, hostile to Constantius, which sought to depreciate the emperor's initiative in assigning the obelisk to Rome rather than Constantinople by asserting that Constantine had intended to do the same.<sup>27</sup> It is true that Ammianus displays much contempt for Constantius in describing the visit to Rome. But his portrait is not one-sided. He recognizes the emperor's good points as well;<sup>28</sup> and even if we suppose that he did indeed hope to diminish Constantius by drawing attention to the unoriginality of his gift, his readers could hardly have relished the point, unless they knew Constantius's version too. Certainly Ammianus himself will have seen the obelisk in Rome, and read its inscription; and he makes clear that he considers its erection an act of vaingloriousness on Constantius's part.<sup>29</sup> Yet he says nothing about Constantius's conspicuously displayed version of his father's intentions. Clearly his primary reason for telling the story of the obelisk is antiquarian. He had conducted his own independent researches, both at Thebes itself<sup>30</sup> and in the scholarly literature on obelisks,<sup>31</sup> and he was concerned to set down

<sup>22</sup> Amm. Marc. xvi, 10.17.

<sup>23</sup> Dessau, *ILS* 736.

<sup>24</sup> Iversen (n. 19) 63–4.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. S. Mazzarino, *Aspetti sociali del quarto secolo: ricerche di storia tardo-romano* (Rome 1951) 125–6; G. Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale: Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 à 451* (Paris 1974) 310–11.

<sup>26</sup> Ambr. *ep.* xviii 32.

<sup>27</sup> Mazzarino (n. 25), *loc. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Amm. Marc. xvi 10.13–14; and cf. R. Klein, *Athenaeum* lvii (1979) 105–6, though the transition noted by Amm. from (ridiculously) formal to (acceptably) informal behaviour was a recognized part of imperial *adventus*: S. G. MacCormack, *Art and ceremony in late antiquity* (Berkeley, Ca. 1981) 42–3.

<sup>29</sup> Amm. Marc. xvii 4.12.

<sup>30</sup> Amm. Marc. xvii 4.6.

<sup>31</sup> Amm. Marc. xvii 7.17–23.

the truth as he had discovered it, aware of course that those who happened to know the official version would note the contrast, but feeling that the story was of interest in its own right, even without this extra dimension.

But if Ammianus's version is to be taken more seriously than has been lately the case, it must be shown to be not just plausible, but probable. Ironically, the events of 357 point the way.

Constantius's one and only visit to Rome was designed to celebrate not only various military triumphs, notably that over the usurper Magnentius, but also the *vicennalia* of his reign as Augustus.<sup>32</sup> Themistius's third oration was designed for precisely this occasion, and contains some well-judged remarks on the primacy, in honour at least, of the older capital.<sup>33</sup> Constantine too, though he celebrated his *tricennalia* at Constantinople, visited Rome for both his *decennalia* and his *vicennalia*. And this twentieth anniversary visit fell in the year 326.<sup>34</sup> It would be difficult to imagine a more appropriate gift on this occasion than the Thebes obelisk, which could be interpreted in so many different ways. At the simplest level it was an offering to the capital from the newly reconquered East. More subtly, this unique single obelisk could stand for the Empire's unity under a single ruler. It was a solar symbol too, as Ammianus points out; and it was in the likeness of the Sun, Apollo-Helios, that Constantine was to have himself portrayed (according to later Byzantine sources, who had, though, the advantage of autopsy until the statue fell down on 5 April 1106)<sup>35</sup> atop his famous column in the heart of New Rome.<sup>36</sup> And, lastly, the obelisk will have been seen by many as a pagan monument to set in the balance against the imperially-funded church-building programme which was now transforming the peripheries, at least, of the city.<sup>37</sup> (It is interesting that in the 1580s, when Pope Sixtus V was seized by his frenzy for re-discovering, re-erecting or simply re-siting obelisks, they were still understood as pagan monuments; and once they had been installed in their new ecclesiastical surroundings, they were always exorcized, purified, consecrated and topped out with a cross.)<sup>38</sup> No doubt Constantine announced during his visit that the matter had been put in hand. And though the project was not realized, partly, as Ammianus implies, for technical reasons, partly, no doubt, because conciliation of pagans seemed less and less necessary, the Romans will not have forgotten the promise. Constantius's advisers—or 'sycophants', as Ammianus calls them—had only to remind him of the unfinished business,<sup>39</sup> and leave the implied parallel with his father's *vicennalia* to work its insidious charm.

The actual removal of the obelisk, though, was a diplomatic as well as a technical and organizational problem. During the 320s Constantine systematically robbed pagan temples throughout his empire of their valuables.<sup>40</sup> Agents were sent out, charged with removing the treasures; but the temples themselves were allowed to remain open and to retain the basic cult-objects that were necessary. According to the official line, expressed by Eusebius in his speech at the *tricennalia*, violence was to be avoided. The emperor

did not think he needed infantry or a large army to refute these errors, but one or two of his notables alone were sufficient for the service . . . And these, relying on piety, proceeded amid populous nations and folk through all cities and provinces to search out the persistent error . . .

<sup>32</sup> Klein (n. 28) 99–103.

<sup>33</sup> Them., *or.* iii 41cd etc.; *cf.* Jul., *or.* i 8b (composed late in 356), and Dagron (n. 25) 56–60, on iconographical evidence for this theme.

<sup>34</sup> Barnes (n. 16) 77.

<sup>35</sup> T. Preger, *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitanarum* (Leipzig 1901–7) ii 138.

<sup>36</sup> On the controversial evidence, see Dagron (n. 25) 37–42; A. Cameron and J. Herrin (edd.), *Constantinople in the early eighth century: the Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* (Leiden 1984) 263–4. Compare the inscriptions affixed by Augustus to the obelisks he set up in the Circus Maximus and the Campus Martius: 'Imp(erator)

Caesar Divi f(ilius) Augustus . . . Aegypto in potestatem populi Romani redacta Soli donum dedit' (*CIL* 6.701–2).

<sup>37</sup> On the ambiguities of Constantine's religious policy see the wise remarks of A. Cameron, *JRS* lxxiii (1983) 188–90.

<sup>38</sup> Iversen (n. 19) 31, 38–41, 50, 52–3, 62, 64 etc.—note especially the extremely pointed inscriptions Sixtus always provided for 'his' obelisks.

<sup>39</sup> Amm. Marc. xvii 4.12.

<sup>40</sup> Eus. *Triac.* viii 2–3 (whence the quotation, tr. Drake); *V. Const.* iii 54.

How much more then did tact need to be exercised in the removal of the Thebes obelisk, which was intended not as mere adornment for Christian Constantinople, but as a symbolic gift for still strongly pagan Rome.<sup>41</sup> The conciliatory character of Constantine's gesture is firmly underlined by Ammianus:

He rightly thought (*recte existimans*) that he was committing no sacrilege if he took this marvel from one temple and consecrated it at Rome, that is to say, in the temple of the whole world (*id est in templo mundi totius*).

Before this extended history of the obelisk at xvii 4, Ammianus has already referred to it once before, at the end of his account in book xvi 10 of Constantius's triumphal entry into Rome. And that account constantly recurs to the idea of the 'Eternal City' as sacred. Rome is 'the sanctuary of the whole world'—*asylum mundi totius*—and 'the home of empire and of every virtue'. The temple of Tarpeian Jupiter towers above all else 'as things divine excel those of earth'; the Forum of Trajan is 'admirable even in the unanimous opinion of the gods'. And it is in order to leave at least some mark amidst all this grandeur that Constantius, 'after long deliberation', decides to erect the obelisk. But the idea that the obelisk's new home is 'the temple of the whole world', while its old home at Egyptian Thebes is just an ordinary temple like many others, makes a subtle polemical point that goes beyond the panegyric clichés of book xvi. For one of the most popular pagan texts of late antiquity is the prophecy of cosmic catastrophe contained in the *Perfect discourse* attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. Though only fragments of the original Greek text survive, we have a third- or fourth-century Coptic version of the prophecy and the concluding prayer in Nag Hammadi Codex VI, and a fourth-century Latin translation of the whole work, commonly known as the *Asclepius*.<sup>42</sup> And in the *Asclepius* version of the prophecy we find Egypt described, precisely, as *imago caeli* and *mundi totius templum*.<sup>43</sup> The prophecy was widely quoted in the fourth century, most notably by Lactantius and Augustine.<sup>44</sup> Ammianus alludes elsewhere to 'Hermes Termaximus',<sup>45</sup> and probably had a nodding acquaintance with some of his writings. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that in his remark about the Theban obelisk he has borrowed a phrase from the best-known statement of the Egyptocentric view of the world, in order to underline the supremacy of Rome and, by implication, the unity of the empire. One may even wonder whether Ammianus is quoting from the declaration made by Constantine at the *vicennalia* in Rome. The phrase *recte existimans* implies that the historian has before him some such document, a phrase from which he transcribes and approves. Constantine may well have read the *Perfect discourse*, or rather its Latin version.<sup>46</sup> His son Crispus's one-time tutor, Lactantius, certainly had; while Eusebius, whom Constantine had recently got to know at the Council of Nicaea,<sup>47</sup> was to deliver at the *tricennalia* a speech whose language often recalls that of the Hermetica.

The obelisk project, then, as conceived by Constantine, is to be understood in the context of his finely-balanced relations with his pagan subjects, and in particular of his desire to conciliate the pagan Establishment of Old Rome. The agent to whom he entrusted the negotiations with the priests or other authorities at Thebes had to be a reliable and respected pagan. Nicagoras, who was in Thebes in 326, was exactly that: an official of a famous temple and a loyal subject of an emperor whom he had no qualms about calling 'most pious'.<sup>48</sup> As an imperial emissary, he

<sup>41</sup> It should not be assumed that emperors thought it beneath their dignity to ask politely when they wanted an obelisk: Jul. *ep.* 59. (Julian's proposal that the Alexandrians should swap an obelisk abandoned on their beach by Constantius for a colossal bronze statue of himself was not intended humorously.)

<sup>42</sup> *NHC* vi 7–8: J.-P. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Egypte* (Quebec 1978–82) i 157–67, ii 145–207. *Ascl.* (with Greek fragments): A. D. Nock and A.-J. Festugière (edd.), *Corpus Hermeticum* ii (Paris 1946) 296–355.

<sup>43</sup> *Ascl.* 24 = *NHC* vi 8.3–10. Cf. Eun. *V. Phil.* vi

10.8: ἡ δὲ Ἀλεξάνδρεια διὰ γε τὸ τοῦ Σεράπιδος ἱερὸν ἱερά τις ἦν οἰκουμένη.

<sup>44</sup> The passages are conveniently set out by W. Scott, *Hermetica* iv (Oxford 1936) 9–27, 179–91.

<sup>45</sup> *Amm. Marc.* xxi 14.5.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Barnes (n. 11) 47, 73–6, and Lane Fox (n. 11) 658–62, on Constantine's acquaintance with literature and philosophy.

<sup>47</sup> Barnes (n. 11) 266–7.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Phot. *Bibl.* 62: φησιν οὖν ὁ Πραξαγόρας, καίτοι τὴν θρησκείαν Ἑλλήνων ὄν, ὅτι πάση ἀρετῇ καὶ

will not have travelled alone; and it seems likely that the names of some of Nicagoras's companions are preserved in the numerous other scribblings that can still be read, clustered round his, in the tomb of Ramses VI.<sup>49</sup> Apart from the negotiations in Thebes, and the dividend he expected them to pay in Rome, the gratitude of the Athenian élite will undoubtedly have had its part in Constantine's calculations. One would hardly expect Nicagoras's casual graffiti to refer to the reasons for his mission;<sup>50</sup> but the sense of obligation he felt towards the emperor is clear enough.<sup>51</sup>

GARTH FOWDEN

*Klassiek Instituut, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen*  
*National Hellenic Research Foundation, Athens*

καλοκάγαθία καὶ παντὶ εὐτυχίῳ πάντας τοὺς πρὸ αὐτοῦ βεβασιλευκότας ὁ Βασιλεὺς Κωνσταντῖνος ἀπεκρύψατο.

<sup>49</sup> Baillet (n. 11) 289–96.

<sup>50</sup> Compare the similarly laconic graffito left in the Valley of the Kings by a member of the French expedition which in 1831 removed from Luxor the obelisk that now stands in the Place de la Concorde: Baillet (n. 1) v n. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Compare Valerius Rometalca, a Thracian whom Constantine made *dux Aegypti et Thebaidos utrarumque Libyarum*, and who dedicated three statues to his benefactor in the temple at Luxor, probably c. 324/5: P. Lacau, 'Inscriptions latines du temple de Louxor', *ASAE* xxxiv (1934) 35–46; *PLRE* i, s.v. 'Val. Rometalca'. Maybe he is the Ροιμητάλκας who left a graffito in the Valley of the Kings: Baillet, *Inscriptions* no. 292.