

THE CAREER OF ABINNAEUS

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FOR SEVERAL YEARS in the reign of Constantius, Flavius Abinnaeus served as *praefectus* of the *Ala Quinta Praelectorum* and commander of the fort at Dionysias in the Arsinoite nome which it garrisoned. He would be totally unknown to history but for a happy accident of survival. After his service at Dionysias, Abinnaeus appears to have retired to Philadelphia, also in the Fayyûm, taking with him papers relating to his years of military command. In 1892 and 1893 some eighty papyri which had belonged to Abinnaeus were offered for sale in Egypt. Almost all of them found their way into the libraries of the British Museum and the University of Geneva, and in 1962, after most had been published with other papyri from those two collections, virtually the whole of the archive which has survived received exemplary publication under the supervision of Sir Harold Idris Bell.¹

The reconstruction of Abinnaeus' career offered by the editors of the *Abinnaeus Archive* was subsequently adopted in the first volume of the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*.² Since its chronology is partly founded on the false proposition that the imperial audience which Abinnaeus had in Constantinople "can have been granted only in the latter part of 337 or the spring of 338,"³ pedantry alone might recommend a re-examination. Moreover, the search for greater accuracy and greater precision of detail may permit Abinnaeus' career to be linked to better known events and more famous personages.

¹H. I. Bell, V. Martin, E. G. Turner, and D. van Berchem, *The Abinnaeus Archive. Papers of a Roman Officer in the reign of Constantius II* (Oxford 1962), cited here as *Archive*. The first section of the introduction, by V. Martin, describes the origin and discovery of the archive (1 ff.).

One papyrus was included which does not belong to the archive, viz. *PGen.* 60 = *PAbinn.* 65: see H. Cadell, "P. Genève 60, B.G.U. II, 456 et le problème du bois en Égypte," *Cd'E* 51 (1976) 331–348, who republishes the whole contract of which it forms part (*BGU* 456 + *PAbinn.* 65 + *PBerlin inv.* 8001). And one papyrus must be added, R. Rémondon, "Un papyrus inedit des archives d'Abinnaeus," *JJurPap* 18 (1974) 33–37.

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²*PLRE* 1 (1971) 1–2, with J. R. Martindale, "Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: *addenda et corrigenda* to Volume II," *Historia* 23 (1974) 246–252, at 246. Also in the article by R. Rémondon, "Militaires et civils dans une campagne égyptienne au temps de Constance II," *JSav* 1965.132–143.

³E. G. Turner, *Archive* 8.

I

Abinnaeus is first attested as commander of the *ala* at Dionysias on 29 March 342 by a petition to him found among the papers of Aurelius Sakaon (*PTheadelphia* 23 = *PAbinn.* 44 = *PSakaon* 47). Among the papers of Abinnaeus himself is the draft of an earlier petition in Latin, in which Abinnaeus recounts the events leading to his appointment as *praefectus alae* at Dionysias, and requests the emperors Constantius and Constans to ensure that he be permitted to assume the post to which they have promoted him (*PAbinn.* 1).

Abinnaeus' origin and the first stage in his career are lost in a lacuna, but he seems to say that he served for thirty-three years in the *vexillatio* of Parthian archers stationed at Diospolis in the province of the Upper Thebaid (lines 4–5). He came to the imperial court when Senecio, the *comes limitis* of the province, directed him to escort certain *refugae* of the tribe of the Blemmyes to Constantinople: Abinnaeus went with the *comes* and ambassadors of the Blemmyes, whom he presented to Constantius —“whereupon your divinity ordered me, from the station of *ducenarius*, to adore your venerable purple” (lines 5–8), i.e., the emperor or emperors bestowed on Abinnaeus the honorary rank of protector (as implied by lines 1–3, cf. *PAbinn.* 55). The precise date can be ascertained. Abinnaeus found Constantius in Constantinople. But Constantius never resided in that city except as a child: from 335 until 350, his capital and normal residence was Antioch, whence he regularly set forth on campaign against the Persians in the spring of each year from 338 onwards.⁴ He visited Constantinople on only two occasions between 335 and the winter of 341/2. In the summer of 336 Constantius was on hand for the tricennalia of his father, when Eusebius documents his presence in the city on 25 July (*Vita Const.* 4.49, cf. *Triac.* 3.4). In the following year, the death of Constantine and the ensuing political and dynastic crisis necessitated a longer visit to western Asia Minor and Europe. Constantius arrived in Nicomedia shortly after his father's death on 22 May, and probably spent some time in Constantinople before conferring with his brothers in Pannonia in the late summer: he then passed through the city again in the autumn on his way to Antioch for the winter of 337/8.⁵

Eusebius happens to record that he saw ambassadors from many foreign nations, including the Blemmyes, outside the imperial palace, on an occasion which can only be the tricennalia of Constantine in July 336 (*Vita Const.* 4.7.1). Abinnaeus (it should be deduced) came to Constantinople in

⁴See, provisionally, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge, Mass. 1982) 85 f. (to 337); *Phoenix* 34 (1980) 162–166 (337–350).

⁵For the evidence, *New Empire* 86. The most explicit items upon which this reconstruction rests are *Julian Orat.* 1 16d, 19a, 20c; *Socrates HE* 2.7; *Zonaras* 13.4.

the summer of 336. When he speaks of a journey *ad sacra vestigia pietatis vestrae* and an order from *divinitas vestra*, he does not mean either that he saw both Constantius and Constans in Constantinople or that he came to Constantius alone and saw no other emperor. Of the five emperors then reigning, only Constantine himself and Constantius were present in Constantinople during the celebration of Constantine's tricennalia in July 336: presumably, therefore, Abinnaeus performed *adoratio purpurae* before Constantius and his father. On the other hand, the joint address to Constantius and Constans does not imply that Abinnaeus sent his petition to both emperors. Emperors who ruled jointly formed a college: in accordance with the etiquette of imperial collegiality, Abinnaeus addressed both the emperors ruling in 340 or 341 when he sent his petition to Constantius alone.

In Constantinople, Abinnaeus received instructions to conduct the ambassadors of the Blemmyes back to their native land. Abinnaeus spent a period of three years with the ambassadors (he presumably includes the journey as well as his time in the country of the Blemmyes); then he visited the imperial court again, bringing recruits from the province of the Thebaid which he delivered at Hierapolis (lines 8–10). This audience probably belongs to 339 or 340. For time must be allowed before the audience for Abinnaeus' *trienne tempus* with the ambassadors of the Blemmyes, including two long journeys, from the Bosphorus to the southern frontier of Egypt and from there to northern Syria, while after the audience lengthy delays occurred before Abinnaeus took command at Dionysias, where he is attested on 29 March 342 (*PAbinn.* 44). Constantius' precise whereabouts are not on record between 27 December 338, when he was at Antioch (*CTh* 2.6.4) and 12 August 340 when he was at Edessa (*CTh* 12.1.30, with Seeck's emendation of the place of issue from *Bessae* to *Edessae*). Abinnaeus' delivery of recruits may be relevant to a sometimes neglected literary text.⁶ The author of the so-called *Itinerarium Alexandri* set forth the examples of Alexander and Trajan for Constantius to emulate in a Persian campaign which he was about to undertake—and in which (so the writer fervently declared) he would at last make the servile Persians free citizens of the Roman Empire. The *Itinerarium Alexandri* was composed shortly after the death of Constantine in the late winter or spring of 340. It could well be that its author heralds the campaign for which Abinnaeus helped to bring Constantius a much-needed supply of Egyptian recruits. That was a standard procedure before an eastern emperor embarked on any aggressive expedition: monastic hagiography describes what seems to be Maximinus' enrolling of Egyptian recruits in 312/3 prior to his attack on Licinius.⁷

⁶On its importance and context, *JRS* 75 (1985) 135.

⁷*Sancti Pachomii Vita Prima* 4, ed. F. Halkin, *Sancti Pachomii Vitae Graecae* (Brussels

At Hierapolis, Abinnaeus was released from active service under colours and appointed *praefectus* of the *ala* at Dionysias. On his return to Egypt, however, when he submitted his letter of appointment to the *comes* Valacius, the bureau of the *comes* replied that other men had produced letters of this type and refused to act upon his imperial letter (lines 12–14). Abinnaeus accordingly composed a petition to Constantius: a copy survives among his papers solely because he was dissatisfied with the initial formulation of his request and therefore dictated an amended version of the all-important clause. In his first formulation, Abinnaeus invited the emperor to contemplate his past labours and begged him to ensure his daily sustenance (lines 13–14). On second thoughts, Abinnaeus substituted for this the request that, since the others had been promoted *ex suffragio*, while he had an imperial patent, the emperor should order those who had promotion *per suffragium* to be removed and Abinnaeus to take up the post (written above lines 12–13). Whether, how, and to what immediate effect the petition was submitted are unknown, but at all events Abinnaeus obtained his desire and reward: by 29 March 342 he had become *praefectus* of the *ala Quinta Praelectorum* and commander of the garrison at Dionysias.

Abinnaeus' petition sheds a disturbing light on the administration of Constantius, and it is highly unfortunate that some recent discussions of *suffragatio* in the emperor's reign pass over this interesting document in silence.⁸ Abinnaeus makes a firm distinction between appointment *ex suffragio* and appointment *iudicio sacro*, between those who hold their positions *per suffragium* and one like himself, who has an imperial letter of appointment (*apices vestros*). He thus assumes that those who obtained posts by *suffragium* did not receive appointment by or from the emperor, but only from their patrons. On the other hand, when the bureau of Valacius received the imperial letter (*sacrae litterae*) which Abinnaeus submitted, it refused to act on the strength of it, on the grounds that others too had submitted exactly similar letters. Since Abinnaeus denounces the latter as beneficiaries of *suffragium*, it seems to follow that the officials of

1932, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 19) 3. The *vita* states that it was Constantine under whom Pachomius enlisted for a war against a "tyrant:" for the correct date, D. J. Chitty, *Studia Patristica* 2 (Berlin 1957, Texte und Untersuchungen 64) 379 f.

⁸There is no mention of *PAbinn.* 1 in C. Collot, "La pratique et l'institution du *suffragium* au Bas-Empire," *RHistDroit*⁴ 43 (1965) 185–221; W. A. Goffart, "Did Julian combat venal 'suffragium'?", *CP* 65 (1970) 145–151; C. Vogler, *Constance II et l'administration impériale* (Strasbourg 1979) 244 ff. Vogler's omission is all the more inexplicable because her survey of sources notes that *PAbinn.* 2 documents the use (and abuse) of *suffragium* under Constantius (73 f., 80). Abinnaeus' petition is, however, briefly discussed by D. Liebs, "Ämterkauf und Ämterpatronage in der Spätantike. Propaganda und Sachzwang bei Julian dem Abtrünnigen," *ZSav.*, Rom. Abt. 95 (1978) 158–186, at 172 f.

Constantius' court issued letters of appointment in his name without obtaining the emperor's explicit authorisation.

II

Some time during the consular year 344 Valacius, the *dux et comes* of Egypt, sent Abinnaeus a brusque letter of dismissal (*PAbinn.* 2). Valacius tells Abinnaeus that another ex-protector has been appointed to succeed him *iuxta divinitus sancita*, since Valacius has been informed that the prefect has completed the term of his command (*eo quod [impe]rii iam tempora c[on]plesse suggereris*). The justificatory phrase *iuxta divinitus sancita* is slippery: though it suggests (and was doubtless intended to suggest) that Valacius was acting "in virtue of orders from imperial headquarters,"⁹ a strict construction of his words might reveal a claim merely to be acting "in accordance with statutory procedures" (to put ancient bureaucratic jargon into recognisable modern form). Abinnaeus was not deceived and refused to be supplanted easily. He set off again for the imperial court, obtaining two promissory letters dated 1 and 2 February 345 in which friends undertook to reimburse him for expenses incurred in furthering their interests. In the one, the president of the local council of Arsinoe contracts for the obtaining of an *epistula exactoriae* (*PAbinn.* 58),¹⁰ while in the other a veteran of Dionysias contracts for the promotion of his son to be *decurio* of the camp at Dionysias (*PAbinn.* 59).

Abinnaeus succeeded in obtaining reinstatement, and he is attested as camp commander from 1 May 346 (*PAbinn.* 47) until 11 February 351 (*PAbinn.* 55). It does not necessarily follow, however, that he journeyed all the way to court and appeared before Constantius.¹¹ For his enemy Valacius perished suddenly and unexpectedly. Riding with the prefect Nestorius on the road just outside Alexandria, he was thrown from his mount and bitten by his companion's horse, dying of his wounds within three days.¹² Valacius' accident probably occurred in 345: at all events the *dux* was clearly dead before Athanasius returned to Alexandria on 21 October 346.¹³ With Valacius' death, Abinnaeus may have been able to obtain reinstatement without needing to travel to the emperor in Syria: he

⁹So the phrase is translated in *Archive* 38.

¹⁰The meaning of the term is disputed: see V. Martin, *Actes du Ve Congrès de Papyrologie* (Brussels 1938) 260–285; J. D. Thomas, *Cd'E* 34 (1959) 124–140, at 132 ff.; A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* (Oxford 1964) 728.

¹¹As argued by E. G. Turner, *Archive* 12.

¹²*Vita Antonii* 86; Athanasius *Historia Arianorum* 14.

¹³The Festal Index registers Palladius as prefect at Easter 344, Nestorius as prefect from 345 to 352; unfortunately, no contemporary document helps to date the beginning of Nestorius' tenure more precisely, the earliest being an imperial letter of summer 346 quoted by Athanasius (*Apol. c. Ar.* 56.2–3).

had an imperial letter of appointment which stated no fixed term for his command, while his supplanter may have had nothing more efficacious than a letter from the *dux et comes* Valacius.

III

The preface to the *Archive* declares that "it is impossible to pronounce definitively" on the question whether Abinnaeus was a Christian, then detects a slight indication (in *PAbinn.* 32) that he was not. Moreover, it argues that "the presence of a statue of Fortune in the place of honour in the camp of Dionysias does not speak in favour of a preponderance of Christianity among the soldiers."¹⁴ The archaeological argument is not cogent, since there seems to be no evidence for the date at which the apparently second-century statue of Nemesis or Victory ceased to be a cult-object.¹⁵ It is more significant that the petitions to Abinnaeus never name a single pagan deity and refer almost thirty times to God (singular) or divine providence rather than to plural gods: the plural occurs only once, and apparently by carelessness or inadvertence, since the petitioner, who is a slave of Abinnaeus himself, closes with the salutation "I pray for your health in the Lord for many years" (*PAbinn.* 36). Moreover, a petition to Abinnaeus published in 1974 implies that he will regard the priest of the village of Hermopolis as a particularly trustworthy witness—and hence indirectly that the prefect is himself a Christian.¹⁶

The latest document in the archive of Abinnaeus is a petition in which Aurelius Heron, a deacon from the village of Berenice in the Arsinoite nome, accuses one Euporus from the village of Philagris of breaking and entering his house, and stealing his clothing (*PAbinn.* 55). After outlining his complaint, Heron asks for restitution of his property and informs Abinnaeus that he is a deacon of the catholic church (lines 14–15). That remark is more pointed than appears at first glance. In the Egypt of the late 340s "catholic" was not a neutral term with an innocuous meaning such as "worldwide."¹⁷ The word conveyed a claim: clergy of the catholic church did not merely belong to the worldwide church as opposed to a heretical or schismatic group, but enjoyed privileges which Constantine and his sons had bestowed on them as clergy of the catholic church. These privileges were not granted to all who called themselves Christians. As early as 313

¹⁴V. Martin, *Archive* 30 ff., esp. 33.

¹⁵J. Schwartz, "Une forteresse construite sous Dioclétien: Qasr-Qarun," *CRAI* 1951.90–96; *Qasr-Qarun/Dionysias 1950* (Cairo 1969) esp. 61 ff.

¹⁶R. Rémondon (above, n. 1) esp. 37. There is no good reason for assigning to the archive the aggressively Christian Strasbourg papyrus published by J. Lesaulnier, "Un nouveau papyrus des archives d'Abinnaeus," *ZPE* 3 (1968) 155–156 (whence *SB* 10755).

¹⁷As the editors of the *Archive* appear to assume (116), with their appeal to S. Eitrem, *Papyri Osloenses* 3 (Oslo 1936) 165, on *POsl.* 113.15 (a security of 346).

Constantine explained to the proconsul of Africa that his bounty was confined to "the catholic church over which Caecilianus presides" (Eusebius *HE* 10.7.2).¹⁸ In Egypt, the definition of "catholic" changed twice in the dozen years before Heron suffered burglary.¹⁹ In 339 Gregorius and his supporters became the recipients of privilege in place of the dispossessed Athanasius and his. Seven years later, when Athanasius returned to Alexandria, Constantius wrote to the prefect of Egypt and to the governors of the other Egyptian provinces annulling any earlier instructions detrimental to those who communicated with Athanasius and restoring to them the freedom from liturgies which they used to enjoy, without removing the exemption of the clergy not in communion with Athanasius (*Apol. c. Ar.* 56.2–3).

The enmity which Valacius showed towards Abinnaeus may not be totally unconnected with ecclesiastical politics. Valacius, the enemy of Abinnaeus, was also the enemy of Athanasius and the monk Antony: he supported Gregorius when the latter replaced Athanasius as bishop of Alexandria, and it was alleged that he whipped monks and assaulted bishops and virgins in order to secure cooperation with the new bishop (Athanasius *Apol. c. Ar.* 12). Abinnaeus may have been an ally and supporter of Athanasius: after he had successfully overcome Valacius' attempt to oust him, he retained his post at Dionysias without known hindrance or challenge when Athanasius, after his return to Alexandria in 346, was building up a power-base in Egypt strong enough to defy the emperor for a decade.

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¹⁸For further evidence, T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass. 1981) 224 ff.; T. G. Elliott, "The Tax Exemptions granted to Clerics by Constantine and Constantius II," *Phoenix* 32 (1978) 326–336.

¹⁹In the papyri, the phrase "catholic church" seems to be restricted to churches directly dependent on bishops within the ecclesiastical hierarchy subordinate to the bishop of Alexandria, cf. E. Wipszycka, *Les ressources et les activités économiques des églises en Égypte du IV^e au VIII^e siècle* (Brussels 1972, Papyrologica Bruxellensia 10) 25 f.