

SOME THEORIES ON THE DATING OF ARNOBIUS

Abstract

The *Adversus Gentes* of Arnobius is commonly dated to c. 303 A.D. though a date of c. 297 has also been proposed. This article asks whether the case for a later dating, implied by Jerome's *Chronicle* and recently defended by Oliver Nicholson (1982) and Mark Edwards (2004), has been conclusively refuted by Michael Simmons (2015). It concludes that, while some of the arguments employed by Edwards and Nicholson carry little weight, the objections to the conventional date of 303 have not been fully answered. The unreliability of Jerome is frequently exaggerated, and the consequences of his testimony that Arnobius wrote with an epideictic, rather than an apologetic, purpose have not been fully appreciated. It is possible that the conflict of evidence can be resolved by postulating a history of redaction.

It is now almost the universal opinion of scholars that the treatise of Arnobius *Against the Nations*, or at least the bulk of it, was written in the course of the persecution which commenced in 303 and was repealed in 311. Most writers on the African apologist believe it to be an unopposed consensus; it is known that there is evidence, both internal and external, which suggests a later date, but this is dispatched with perfunctory ease in the preface to each new edition of the treatise. The aim of the present article is to compare these refutations with the two extensive arguments that have been advanced for the possibility of a later dating, and to ascertain whether anything in these arguments still awaits a conclusive answer. For this purpose, having first examined the growth of the consensus (insofar as it is a consensus), I shall summarise the case for the opposing position as this is presented by Nicholson and Edwards, and compare the two defences of the conventional position by Michael Simmons in his monographs *Arnobius of Sicca* (1995) and *Universal Salvation* (2015). I shall add the caveat here that my intention, like that of the studies to which I refer, is not to found a new orthodoxy or to prove the current orthodoxy untenable, but to persuade its hitherto somnolent defenders that the foundations on which it rests are in need of repair.

The canonical dating of Arnobius

All the positions that have since been held had already been taken, and the evidence for each had been defined, when Le Nourry wrote the excursus which was subsequently reprinted as the preface to *Adversus Nationes* in J.-P. Migne's *Patrologia Latina*.¹ The two external testimonies, both supplied by Jerome, were (as he noted) contradictory. According to the remarkably detailed narrative in his *Chronicle*, Arnobius was required to compose the treatise when he presented himself as a convert to a bishop who was aware that he had never spared the church in his previous writings. Although it is attached in the *Chronicle* to the year 326/7, Le Nourry points out that it is not

¹ J.-P. MIGNE, *Patrologia Latina* V, Paris: Sirou, 1844, 391-393.

a new item but a pendant to Jerome's observation that the Eusebian *Chronicle* terminates here. Briefer but later - and hence, maybe, the product of further reflection or inquiry - is Jerome's statement in the work *On Famous Men* that Arnobius flourished in the reign of Diocletian and wrote his seven books *Against the Nations* which are still in everyone's hands.² The Latin is most naturally construed to mean that all seven books were written under Diocletian, that is between 285 and 305. Le Nourry therefore favours this earlier date; he admits, however, that two opinions might be held as to whether the apology was written in the era of persecution. Arnobius estimates the age of Rome at 1500 years (*Against the Nations* 2,71), which on the chronology of Varro implies a date around 297; on the other hand, his assertion that Christianity has been in the world for 300 years "more or less" (1.13.2) seems to put us outside the reign of Diocletian by some decades. Le Nourry, who assumes that both calculations are rhetorically imprecise, is not the first to remark that a reference to the burning of books is the strongest indication that Arnobius had witnessed the enforcement of the first edict against the Christians in 303. At the same time, he concedes to those who uphold the date of 297 that the church may not have suffered this calamity for the first time in 303. If he himself inclines to the view that the writing took place during the persecution of Diocletian, this would seem to be a deduction from Jerome's testimony rather than from Arnobius' vivid use of the present tense.

In some important pages of his *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne*, Pierre Monceaux observes that no apologist before 303 would have witnessed the demolition of Christian buildings in the west.³ He dates the final redaction of the treatise to the era of persecution, but suggests that it has passed through more than one stage of composition, as is evident from the hiatus in the argument between Books 2 and 3. He dates the first book to 296 (300 years after the birth of Christ), the second to 297 (on the evidence of 2.71), the remainder to the years of persecution. George MacCracken rejects this inference in the comprehensive and trenchant preface to his English version of Arnobius, assigning the entire work to the years of fire and ruin.⁴ By contrast Henri Le Bonniec, in his introduction to a bilingual edition of the first two books, espouses a modified form of Monceaux's hypothesis: the second book, in his view, was composed, as its allusion to the age of Rome implies, in 297, but was subsequently inserted as a digression between Books 1 and 3 of the work as we now possess.⁵ The other six books he assumes to have been contemporaneous with the

² JEROME, *On Famous Men* 79. The entry on Lactantius follows at 80 in most manuscripts.

³ P. MONCEAUX, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne*, vol. 3, Paris: Leroux, 1906, 245.

⁴ G. MCCRACKEN, *Arnobius: the Case against the Pagans*, London: Longmans, 1949, 11, though he acknowledges that "locutions" can be found in the present text that "seem to anticipate something later". At p. 8 he nominates 311 as a *terminus ante quem*, since there is no reference in the treatise to the repeal of persecution.

⁵ H. LE BONNIEC, *Arnobius: Contre les Gentils*, Paris: Belles Lettres, 1982, 30-34.

persecution, and therefore sets a *terminus post quem* of 311, taking more account of the author's use of the present tense than of Jerome's testimony that he reached his *floruit* under Diocletian.

The handbooks and encyclopaedias concur with the foregoing arguments, each adding its own margin of imprecision. Adolf Jülicher, writing in Pauly-Wissowa's *Real-Encyclopädie*, assigns the work to the era of persecution, while allowing that Arnobius may have lived until 326.⁶ The new edition of Altaner states that Arnobius was writing between 304 and 310;⁷ Quasten is content to say that he must have laid down his pen by 311, since he makes frequent reference to the persecution but none to its end or the restoration of Christian property.⁸ H.G. F. Moule, in the *Dictionary of Christian Biography*,⁹ admits the conflict of evidence but declares that it points "on the whole" to the years between 303 and 313; in the *New Pauly*, Fabio Mora offers an earlier dating (297-303), while allowing 311 as the latest possible *terminus ante quem*.¹⁰ This interval is too long for Michael Simmons, who argues in his monograph, *Arnobius of Sicca*, that no part of the treatise need have been written before the eruption of hostilities against the church in Africa, or later than Diocletian's abdication in 305.

The chief aim of this astute and tenacious study is to demonstrate that Arnobius may have conceived his work as a comprehensive refutation of Porphyry's invective *Against the Christians*. Simmons concurs with those who identify Porphyry as the philosopher who took up his pen to exacerbate the sufferings of the church after 303;¹¹ he also suspects that a lost work by Lactantius is the source of Jerome's statement that Arnobius flourished under Diocletian, notwithstanding the pupil's silence regarding his master in his extant works.¹² He contends that if the date of 327 in Jerome's *Chronicle* is attached to the publication of the treatise (and not, for example, to the death of the author), it is derived from some less competent source on which he had ceased to rely when he wrote the treatise *On Famous Men*.¹³ He concedes that there are passages in Arnobius which refer to persecution as a hypothetical measure, and which therefore must have been written before the first edict of February 303;¹⁴ on the other hand, he does not endorse Le Bonniec's conclusion

⁶ G. WISSOWA (ed.), *Pauly's Real-Encyclopädie*, vol 2, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995, 1206.

⁷ B. ALTANER and A. STIIBER, *Patrologie*, Vienna: Herder, 1978, 103

⁸ J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, Antwerp: Spectrum, 1953, 384,

⁹ *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, ed. H. SMITH, vol. 1, London: John Murray, 1900, 100.

¹⁰ H. CANKIK and H. SCHNEIDER (eds), *The New Pauly*, vol. 2, Leiden: Brill, 2002, 19.

¹¹ M. SIMMONS, *Arnobius of Sicca*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995, 77, quoting authorities on both sides of the question in the footnotes. On pp. 62-64 he suggests that at 2.71 Arnobius reckons the age of Rome from the times of Latinus, Faunus and Picus because the early history of Latium also figured in Porphyry's work against the Christians (Augustine, Letter 102).

¹² SIMMONS, *Arnobius of Sicca*, 50-53.

¹³ SIMMONS, *Arnobius of Sicca*, 49 and 52.

¹⁴ SIMMONS, *Adversus Nationes* 3.36.1-6 is cited at *Arnobius of Sicca*, 91, together with 1.26 and 4.16.

that the first two books were initially conceived as a separate work, because Book 3 describes Book 2 as a planned digression.¹⁵ That Arnobius had witnessed Diocletian's persecution before the completion of his work is sufficiently evident from his protest against the burning of books and the demolition of churches;¹⁶ these, according to Simmons, are the "new penalties" which the tyrants have devised for the church of his day.¹⁷ While he grants that some of the atrocities which Arnobius deplores were matters of record rather than observation in the fourth century,¹⁸ he argues that the denunciation of sacrifice in the seventh book was prompted by the efforts of pagan magistrates to force this act upon Christians. Of this, he opines, there is evidence enough in Christian martyrology, whether or not the fourth Edict of Diocletian was promulgated in the west.¹⁹

Simmons sees no reason to surmise that any part of the work was written after Diocletian's abdication in 305.²⁰ Before this date it would already have been possible for Christians to make light of pagan appeals to the gods as benefactors and guardians of peace; the strictures of Arnobius on divine incest would be all the more piquant if they followed had on Diocletian's legislation against the infringement of this taboo.²¹ At the same time, he is no more inclined to posit an earlier date than 302 for the inception of the work. It is only the Varronian chronology that permits us to deduce a date of 297 from the apologist's reckoning of the age of Rome at 1500 years; since this was not the chronology in use among all Christians, we need not assume that Arnobius employed it to the exclusion of every other.²² As for the assertion that Christianity has been in the world for 300 years (AN 1.13), the age of the church had been calculated from Christ's nativity, rather than from his death, in a number of authors before Arnobius,²³ On the other hand, the allusions to foreign inroads and martial engagements are too vague to support historical inferences: Simmons therefore favours a continuous history of composition from 302 to 305.

The case for a later date

¹⁵ SIMMONS, *Arnobius of Sicca*, 54.

¹⁶ SIMMONS, *Arnobius of Sicca*, 81, citing AN 4.36.17-18. On pp. 64-70, SIMMONS discusses the references in 1.26 to spoliation of Christian goods and visitation of oracles, though, as he admits on p. 76, this passage does not afford conclusive proof of his having witnessed the Great Persecution.

¹⁷ SIMMONS, *Arnobius of Sicca*, 83, citing AN 6.11.22ff.

¹⁸ On the possibility that 1.26 alludes to persecutions under previous rulers see also *Arnobius of Sicca*, 76.

¹⁹ SIMMONS, *Arnobius of Sicca*, 84-88, citing *Passio Sanctae Crispinae*, the *Acta Purgationis Felicis* and Optatus, *Against the Donatists* 3.8.

²⁰ SIMMONS, *Arnobius of Sicca*, 90-93.

²¹ SIMMONS, *Arnobius of Sicca*, 70-76, citing *Against the Nations* 4.22-24, 5.9., 6.4 and *Mosaiacarum et Romanarum Legum Collatio* 6.1 and 6.4.2.

²² SIMMONS, *Arnobius of Sicca*, 55-62, a very intricate argument which cannot be summarised here.

²³ SIMMONS, *Arnobius of Sicca*, 55 n. 45, apparently misconstruing McCracken, *Case against the Pagans*, 244 n. 55.

The first challenge to the consensus was advanced by Oliver Nicholson, arguing not so much in favour of the date in Jerome's *Chronicle* as against excessive confidence in the earlier date suggested by his treatise *On Famous Men*.²⁴ Although they appeared in 1982, his brief observations were overlooked not only by Simmons in 1995 but by Mark Edwards in 1999,²⁵ when he argued in a collective work on ancient apologetics that the evidence against the later date was not coercive. At this point Edwards dwelt chiefly on the silence of Lactantius and the absence of any explicit reference to the Great Persecution. In response to the fiery criticism of Timothy Barnes,²⁶ he devoted a longer study to the topic in 2004, adducing hitherto unnoticed allusions to historical events which, in his view, would be more plausibly assigned to the age of Constantine than to that of Diocletian.²⁷ Simmons answered first with a dismissive footnote, merely summarizing Edwards's arguments,²⁸ then with a parenthetical jibe in a short review of Bernard Fragu's edition²⁹ of the last two books of *Adversus Nationes*,³⁰ and finally with six pages of detailed criticism in his monograph *Universal Salvation in Antiquity*.³¹ The publication of this book almost coincided with that of Edwards's *Religions of the Constantinian Empire*, in which he both reinforced and modified his own thesis.³²

Some of the arguments which have been urged against the consensus are too familiar to trouble its adherents. The failure of Lactantius to mention Arnobius is, as Nicholson says,³³

²⁴ O. NICHOLSON, *The Date of Arnobius' Adversus Gentes*, *Studia Patristica* 15 (1984), 100-107.

²⁵ M.J. EDWARDS, *The Flowering of Latin Apologetic*, in M.J. EDWARDS, M.D. GOODMAN AND S.R.F. PRICE (eds), *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 197-221.

²⁶ T.D. BARNES, *Monotheists all?*, *Phoenix* 55 (2001), 142-162.

²⁷ M.J. EDWARDS, *Dating Arnobius: Why Discount the Evidence of Jerome?*, *L'Antiquité Tardive* 12 (2004), 263-271.

²⁸ M.B. SIMMONS, *Porphyrian Universalism: A Tripartite Soteriology and Eusebius' Response*, *Harvard Theological Review* 102 (2009), 169-192 at p. 170.

²⁹ B. FRAGU, *Arnobé: Contre les gentils (Contre les païens) livres VI-VII*, Paris: Belles Lettres, 2010, xx-xxiii. FRAGU himself does not cite Nicholson or Edwards, and while he appears to know the work of Simmons, he is content to follow Le Bonniec in dating the inception of the treatise to 297 and its completion to some time before 311.

³⁰ Review of FRAGU (above) at bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2012/2012-8-36.html: "a recent article by Mark J. Edwards, which comes to the absolutely ridiculous conclusion that Arnobius wrote c. 327". It will be seen that he takes no note of EDWARDS's caveat that he is not espousing a new date for Arnobius but arguing that it deserves consideration. A brief, and less acrimonious, appraisal of EDWARDS's argument can be found in N. THOMAS, *Defending Christ: The Latin Apologists before Augustine*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2011, concluding on p. 140 that EDWARDS has not produced sufficient evidence from the text.

³¹ M.B. SIMMONS, *Universal Salvation in Antiquity*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 67-73. Simmons takes exception to an article by EDWARDS entitled *Porphyry and the Christians*, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 2007, in which EDWARDS suggests that Iamblichus may have been one of the "new men" (*novi viri*) whom ARNOBIUS denounces in Book 2 of *Adversus Nationes*. The dating of the work is hardly germane to the discussion, since if Iamblichus was born in the mid-third century (as most scholars now believe) a school will already have formed around him in 303.

³² M.J. EDWARDS, *Religions of the Constantinian Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 54.

³³ NICHOLSON, *Date of Arnobius*, 104-105.

consistent with a dating of the latter's work to 327; on the other hand, it is also possible that Lactantius wished to spare his former tutor, or that once he took up residence in Bithynia he had ceased to hear news from Africa. Again, if we accept Jerome's testimony that Arnobius was required to write his treatise to prove the sincerity of his conversion, we may argue, with Edwards and Nicholson, that his motives would not have been doubted at a time when the price of conversion might be death;³⁴ but Simmons can answer, reasonably enough, that the sudden conversion of a hitherto virulent enemy would excite suspicion in any circumstances. One is still free to appeal from Jerome's *Chronicle* to the statement in his treatise *On Famous Men* which seems to imply that Arnobius wrote under Diocletian. Edwards points to a passage of the same work in which Jerome states that Tertullian *sub Severo principe et Antonio Caracalla maxime floruit, multaque scripsit volumina quae, quia nota sunt plurimis, praetermitto*,³⁵ and comments "No-one has ever argued from this statement that Tertullian wrote nothing after Caracalla's death in 217 (*sic*)".³⁶ Yet Timothy Barnes had already surmised that every extant writing by Tertullian was published before 218. Again Edwards cites Jerome's statement that Dionysius of Alexandria "was head of the catechetical school as a presbyter under Heraclas, *et Origenis valde insignis auditor fuit*",³⁷ pronouncing it impossible that Dionysius could have attained this dignity while sitting at Origen's feet. Here he is correct, but the conjunction is *et*, not *-que*.

On the other hand, it appears that no new arguments of any force have been advanced in favour of the dating to 303. Simmons insists that only one inference can be drawn when Arnobius speaks of pagan atrocities in the present tense; Nicholson, however, was not unaware of these passages when he judged the tone of the treatise to be that of one who "recollects the persecution in relative security"³⁸ For Edwards the present tense signifies only that pagans are perennially inclined to persecution, not that persecution is currently in force; even the charge of inventing "new persecutions", in which Simmons saw an incontrovertible reference to contemporary phenomena, is in fact a quotation from Cyprian. He also observes that the treatise mentions previous crimes against the church which were not repeated during the Great Persecution, and that martyrdom is spoken of in the present tense in Constantine's *Oration to the Saints*.³⁹ Even less substantial is Simmons' argument that a treatise published after the triumph of Constantine would not have failed to commemorate the conversion of the Emperor, the battle of the Milvian Bridge, the so-called Edict of

³⁴ EDWARDS, *Dating Arnobius*, 264; NICHOLSON, *Date of Arnobius*, 102.

³⁵ JEROME, *On Famous Men* 53.2: "he flourished chiefly under the Emperor Severus and Antonius Caracalla, and wrote many books which, since they are very commonly known, I pass over".

³⁶ EDWARDS, *Dating Arnobius*, 266.

³⁷ JEROME, *On Famous Men*, 69 at *Dating Arnobius*, 266.

³⁸ NICHOLSON, *Date of Arnobius*, 102.

³⁹ EDWARDS, *Dating Arnobius*, 265. We have noted above that Simmons in fact concedes this.

Milan, the death of Maximinus, the final overthrow of Licinius, and Constantine's legislation against false cults.⁴⁰ Simmons, like too many scholars before him, is resting his chronology on an argument from silence which forgets that, according to Jerome, the *Adversus Nationes* was an artificial performance; the actual circumstances of composition are not deducible from the content any more than in Plato's *Menexenus* or Aelius Aristides' *Vindication of the Four*. Moreover, there are scholars who are willing to entertain a date after 325 for apologetic writings by Eusebius which never expressly say that a Christian holds the reins of empire;⁴¹ the works of Athanasius *Against the Nations* and *On the incarnation* imply that pagan worship is still rife, though there are some who now maintain that they were composed after the death of Constantine.⁴²

Once the weaker arguments are discounted, three remain which favour a dating of the treatise to the decade following Constantine's accession as sole Emperor. Two have some claim to novelty, while the first is evergreen:

1. Simmons has yet to find a parallel which would justify his contention that the "three hundred years" of the church at 1.13 are reckoned from the birth of Christ. Tertullian, *Apology* 7.3 asserts that the anomalous use of torture to elicit not confession but denial began in the reign of Tiberius, who was emperor at the time of the crucifixion but not of Christ's birth; Lactantius, *Deaths of the Persecutors* 2 refers us to the last years of this emperor, which fall after the crucifixion by a decade; Eusebius, *Church History* 1.5.1 does indeed take Christ's birth as the commencement of his narrative, but it is not his purpose here to measure the age of Christianity. If, on the other hand, Arnobius reckoned from the date of the crucifixion - or the beginning of Christ's ministry, no more than three years before - his figure of three hundred years would indicate that he was writing a few years before or after 330. It cannot be denied that this estimate favours Jerome's date of 327 for the writing of the treatise.⁴³
2. The lengthy denunciation of pagan sacrifice in Book 7 is adduced by Simmons and Barnes as an unequivocal proof that the treatise *Against the Nations* was composed under persecution.⁴⁴ Edwards, however, maintains that the same polemics could have been

⁴⁰ SIMMONS, *Universal Salvation*, 60-63.

⁴¹ See now S. MORLET, *La démonstration évangélique d'Eusèbe de Césarée*, Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 2009, 80-93.

⁴² E.g. C. KANNENGIESSER, *The Dating of Athanasius' Double Apology and the Three Orations against the Arians*, *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 10 (2006), 19-33.

⁴³ NICHOLSON, "Date of Arnobius", 99 opines that the calculation is too vague to support any chronological inference.

⁴⁴ BARNES, *Monotheists all?*, 152. Against those who have doubted whether the edict requiring sacrifice was enforced in the west, SIMMONS argues that the martyrologies give sufficient evidence of its promulgation, at least in Africa.

employed to justify the suppression of sacrifice by a Christian Emperor.⁴⁵ He observes that the question posed in the seventh book is “Why should not pagans sacrifice?” rather than “Why should Christians do so?”⁴⁶ Simmons replies that any debate on sacrifice between Christians and pagans had been foreclosed in 327 by Constantine’s prohibition of sacrifice⁴⁷. Few scholars, whether or not they believe that such a law was passed, would hold that Constantine succeeded in doing away with all sacrifice, let alone all dissent;⁴⁸ and Simmons himself, when he argues that Arnobius has constructed this mock-dialogue in defiance of the edict of 303, concedes that laws may be open to contestation even when rigorously applied.

3. Edwards is the first to see evidence of late composition at *Adversus Nationes* 1.11, where Arnobius ridicules the pagan argument that the Alamanni and Scythici had suffered defeat in battle with the Romans because there were too many Christians among them. Identifying the Scythici with the Goths (as was customary in Latin usage), Edwards observes that the reign of Diocletian saw no victories over this people,⁴⁹ and that Constantine’s humbling of them in 323 raised him above all his predecessors in the eyes of his fellow-Christians. He also quotes E.A. Thomson on the unlikelihood of a mass conversion among the Alamanni by the beginning of the third century.⁵⁰ It appears that no cogent reply to either point has yet been offered:

(a) While it is true that Arnobius was learned enough to recall a Roman victory over the Goths in the reign of Claudius II,⁵¹ it would have been rhetorically ineffectual to recall such a far-off victory in 303, when the failure of Rome to defeat the Goths was a subject of derision.⁵²

⁴⁵ EDWARDS, *Dating Arnobius*, 267-268.

⁴⁶ See *Adversus Nationes* 7.1 and 7.15.

⁴⁷ EDWARDS provides a short bibliography of scholarship on this debated topic at *Dating Arnobius*, 268n. 49. SIMMONS cites Constantine’s Letter to the Provincials as a document testifying to the suppression of sacrifices although at 2.56 it enjoins that pagans are not to be molested; neither he nor BARNES, whom he follows without hesitation, has noted the clear assertion by LIBANIUS, *Oration* 30.6-7 that it was not Constantine but Constantius who introduced the prohibition .

⁴⁸ *Codex Theodosianus* 16.10.2, dated to 341 though only Constantius is named, implies that Constantine’s legislation had not been rigorously enforced. On the inefficacy of legislation against the pagans under Constantine, see SCOTT BRADBURY, *Constantine and the Problem of Anti-Pagan Legislation in the Fourth Century*, *Classical Philology* 89 (1994), 120-139.

⁴⁹ EDWARDS, *Dating Arnobius*, 269. See EUSEBIUS, *Life of Constantine* 1.8 and 4.5; *Panegyrici Latini* 3(11) 17018 and 7(6) 2.

⁵⁰ E.A. THOMSON, *Christianity and the Northern Barbarians*, in A. MOMIGLIANO (ed.), *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, Oxford 1963, 58.

⁵¹ SIMMONS, *Universal Salvation*, 56-57. He also implies on p. 54, however, that the name could apply to all Germanic peoples, though he offers no proof of this.

⁵² LACTANTIUS, *Deaths of the Persecutors* 13.

(b) Simmons contends, on the strength of an unannotated remark by Peter Wells, that the usage of such names as Alamanni was too protean to be of service in a historians' debate.⁵³ In a more detailed monograph, however, Wells says only that archaeology gives the lie to ancient narratives of concerted assaults on the Roman frontier by "formidable armies".⁵⁴ He does not deny that the Alamanni were a real confederacy, inhabiting a particular region and "conscious", as Michael Kulikowski avers, "of a comradeship that they did not feel towards other barbarians who were not Alamanni".⁵⁵ Until it is proved that victories over tribes outside the confederacy were remembered as victories over the Alamanni, the scepticism of E.A. Thomson has not been laid to rest.

On the other side of the account we must set a fact which does not plead well for any date after 297. This, as we have observed, is the date at which we arrive, according to Varro's chronology, if we reckon 1500 years from the origin of Rome (2.71). Simmons suggests that Arnobius employed some other chronology which lowered the age of the city; Edwards takes advantage of this concession by pointing out that the chronology of Cincius yields a date of 323 for the inception of the treatise.⁵⁶ Each, no doubt, is as plausible as the other, but both must admit that at 5.8 the author explicitly takes his chronology from Varro. It appears then that a subtler theory may be required to save all the phenomena; first, however, in order to prove that all the phenomena ought to be saved, it will be necessary to test the common assumption that a date supported only by Jerome's *Chronicle* is more probably false than true.

Excursus on Jerome

It might be thought incongruous that any ink should be spilt in defence of an author so notoriously fallible as Jerome. The *Chronicle*, it is urged, is especially liable to error because, as he himself confesses, it depends heavily on information supplied to him by unnamed secretaries.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the investigations of a more capable scholar, Richard Helm, have shown (in the words of Timothy Barnes) that the dates which Jerome allots to Latin authors in his *Chronicle* are "the

⁵³ SIMMONS, *Universal Salvation*, 57, citing P. WELLS, *People Beyond the Frontiers*, in E. Bispham (ed.), *Roman Europe*, Oxford: OUP 2008, 298-328, esp. 327. This is a bare assertion, not, as SIMMONS asserts, an "insightful analysis". EDWARDS annotates the name Alamanni at some length in *Dating Arnobius*, 269n.68.

⁵⁴ P. S. WELLS, *The Barbarians Speak*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, 219 and 258. The confederation of the Alamanni is assumed as a fact on p. 264.

⁵⁵ M. KULIKOWSKI, *Rome's Gothic Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 39. For detailed topographical information and bibliography see K. Dietz, "Alamanni", in H. CENCIK and H. SCHNEIDER (eds), *Der Neue Pauly*, vol. 1, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1996, 430.

⁵⁶ EDWARDS, *Dating Arnobius*, 270. Cf. DIONYSIUS OF HALICARNEASSUS, *Antiquities* 1.74.1.

⁵⁷ R. HELM, *Hieronymus' Zusätze in Eusebius' Chronik und ihr Wert für die Literaturgeschichte*, Leipzig: Dieterische Verhandlung, 1929, 95.

product of mere guesswork – and hence mistaken”.⁵⁸ If we add that the testimony of Jerome in *On Famous Men*, whatever its source, represents his second thoughts on the matter, must we not also suppose that it is the fruit of a better acquaintance with the facts?

It is not clear why so much is made of the first point, as there is nothing to prove that Jerome was a better scholar than his secretaries. In modern universities it is not uncommon for a distinguished scholar to make use of research assistants, and if it were found that such practices resulted in higher levels of inaccuracy they would surely be discontinued. As to the second point, it is agreed on all sides that if the *Chronicle* were the only evidence for dating Arnobius to the years of peace, it would yield easily to countervailing evidence; on the other hand, if its testimony at this point has been shown to be credible on other grounds, we cannot argue that it must be wrong here because it is wrong elsewhere. As to third point, Jerome’s scholarship is far from impeccable even in his treatise *On Famous Men*, and experience shows that second thoughts are not always best. Gregory Nazianzen had already written against Apollinarius, without misrepresenting him, when he acquired the false belief that his antagonist was teaching the pre-existence of Christ’s flesh. Jerome’s secretaries may have been conversant with sources that he never perused, and his memory may have been less disposed to retain information that he had not discovered for himself. And of course neither Edwards nor Nicholson admits that the dates in Jerome are discrepant; the concluding remarks to this paper suggest that, even if they are, both may be true.

In any case, it would seem that Helm’s authority has been abused to support an unwarrantably low estimate of Jerome’s credibility as a witness. His monograph is an index of all the statements in Jerome’s *Chronicle* which he finds, on comparison with better witnesses, to be either false or baseless. Having found that these are legion, he concludes that Jerome was forced into this spurious precision by his adoption of a literary form which required a fixed date to be assigned to each event.⁵⁹ Eusebius, with a richer fund of scholarship at his disposal, had failed in many cases to give an accurate chronology of Greek authors; Jerome, in his attempts to draw up a comparable roll of honour from Latin literature, made eclectic and uncritical use of his classical sources, but was frequently obliged to supply the dates from his own invention. An egregious case, well known to modern students, is his dating of the death of Catullus to 58 B.C., notwithstanding a reference in his poetry to the conquests of Caesar in Britain, which only the Sibyl could have witnessed before 55 B.C.⁶⁰ Different years are attached to the deaths of those who participated in the conspiracy of Piso,

⁵⁸ BARNES, *Monotheists*, 153, citing HELM, *Hieronymus’ Zusätze*, and cited in turn by SIMMONS, *Universal Salvation*, 301 n. 23.

⁵⁹ HELM, *Hieronymus’ Zusätze*, 92-96.

⁶⁰ HELM, *Hieronymus’ Zusätze*, 38, citing *Carmina* 11.11 and 29.4.

merely because Jerome came upon them at different points in the text of Suetonius.⁶¹ Even where he is not objectively wrong he can be arbitrary: why does the *floruit* of Libanius fall in 368 when that orator surely reached his acme under Julian, who did in 363?⁶²

All this being granted, the error that Jerome made with respect to Catullus is one of his gravest: by contrast, the natal dates of Cicero, Virgil, Horace and Ovid are correct, and Cicero's defence of his brother Quintus is misplaced by at most two years.⁶³ Lucilius indeed is 32 years younger in Jerome than he ought to be on Helm's reckoning,⁶⁴ but he was a figure of remote antiquity, whereas Arnobius died within a generation of Jerome's birth. While Helm is as ready as other scholars to surmise that Jerome has erred by at least sixteen years in his dating of the treatise *Against the Nations*,⁶⁵ he does not produce any miscalculation of comparable magnitude from any part of the *Chronicle*. The anomaly is all the more surprising because this entry begins that portion of the *Chronicle* which Jerome declares to be new: in the entries that follow, Helm suspects much but proves little, and the date in question is often that of an author's *floruit* rather than the more tangible occasion of birth or death. Let us grant, for example, that in assigning the floruit of the poet Juvencus to 329 Jerome exaggerates his knowledge:⁶⁶ 329 must none the less a fair approximation to the date at which Juvencus produced his harmony of the gospels, and there are no grounds here for the inference that Jerome was in the habit of inventing facts when he had none to embellish.

That Jerome is prone to error cannot be denied; we cannot disagree with Christopher Kelly's verdict that in altering the structure of the *Chronicle* Jerome enhanced its lucidity with some loss of precision.⁶⁷ This excursus has shown, however, that an error of twenty years in a date so close to his time would be a rare anomaly; it does not cease to be anomalous if we blame it on the scribe.⁶⁸ Scholars admit as much when they explain it by ingenious conjectures – as, for instance, that he meant to align the writing of the treatise with the Vicennalia of Diocletian in 305, but the scribe transferred it by mistake to the Vicennalia of Constantine.⁶⁹ The hypothesis has nothing to

⁶¹ HELM, *Hieronymus' Zusätze*, 80-83.

⁶² HELM, *Hieronymus' Zusätze*, 92.

⁶³ HELM, *Hieronymus' Zusätze*, 27, 42, 45, 56, 28-29.

⁶⁴ HELM, *Hieronymus' Zusätze*, 24-27.

⁶⁵ HELM, *Hieronymus' Zusätze*, 89.

⁶⁶ HELM, *Hieronymus' Zusätze*, 89, observing that elsewhere Jerome is content to place Juvencus in the reign of Constantine.

⁶⁷ C. KELLY, *The Shape of the Past: Eusebius of Caesarea and Old Testament History*, in C. KELLY, R. FLOWER and M.S. WILLIAMS (eds), *Unclassical Traditions, vol. 1: Alternatives to the Classical Past in late Antiquity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 19.

⁶⁸ As does A.A. MOSSHAMMER, *The Chronicle of Eusebius and Greek Chronographic Tradition*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979, 37.

⁶⁹ SIMMONS, *Arnobius of Sicca*, 48, citing F. Oehler, *Arnobii Oratoris Adversus Nationes Libri Septem*, Leipzig 1846, 9 n.2.

recommend it but its boldness, and would not even bring us to the year 327, since Constantine seized the purple in 306.⁷⁰ Again it is contended that, because he commenced the writing of his own portion of the *Chronicle* at this point, he chose to insert here information that belonged properly to the portion that had been written by Eusebius.⁷¹ It is not clear why he should do so, for we have already seen that he interlards the Greek with the putative dates of Latin authors, and he has no reason to deal with Arnobius otherwise than he dealt with Cicero. The presence of so many entries on Latin authors before the year 327 is sufficient proof that Jerome assigned the treatise *Against the Nations* to this year because he believed it to be the true one (within the usual margin) and not because it happened to be the point at which he became the sole compiler of the work.

Concluding observations

A sober review of the evidence seems to yield no clear advantage to any party in this dispute. It is generally agreed that there are passages in Arnobius which imply that persecution is a present fact; the inference that he was writing while the persecution was still in force, though customary, ignores the ancient practice of writing speeches for imaginary occasions and the clear testimony of Jerome that the work was composed for the author's co-religionists as an earnest of good faith. It is also agreed that other passages speak of persecution as a hypothetical measure, or conflate the sufferings of the Great persecution with those that the church had experienced under previous rulers; in this case, the deduction that the author was writing either before 303 or after 311 is sound enough. The reckoning of the age of Rome at 1500 years (2.71) would point to a date of 297 if Arnobius subscribes to the Varronian chronology; even if he does not, we have a statement in Jerome's work *On Famous Men* which is most naturally construed to mean that the work *Against the Nations* was composed before Diocletian's abdication in 305. On the other hand, the references to victories over Goths and to Christianity among the Alamanni are more consistent with the date of 326 which is implied by Jerome's *Chronicle* and the author's own assertion that Christianity has existed for about 300 years.

Scholars will therefore differ as to which of the data offer the strongest evidence for the dating of the treatise. They will differ again in their willingness to frame conjectural histories of redaction, though such speculations are given full play in scholarship on Optatus, Eusebius and other Christian

⁷⁰ So McCracken, *Case against the Pagans*, 9. SIMMONS in general makes light of McCracken: thus in his catalogue of phenomena which supposedly betray the African provenance of Arnobius (*Universal Salvation*, 303), he ignores McCracken's comment on the absence of any allusion to the lewd cult of Venus at Sicca (*Case against the Pagans*, 7).

⁷¹ First, at least implicitly, by LE NOURRY (n. 1 above).

authors of the fourth century.⁷² We have perhaps as many as three choices: to post no redaction, to posit one, and to posit two, the last option being in this respect the most speculative but otherwise the least tendentious in its handling of the evidence as it stands.

1. We could argue that the whole work is epideictic and therefore indifferent to present circumstances. The historical events to which it alludes, on this theory, would furnish only a terminus *post quem*; the use of non-Varronian computations, together with a possible if somewhat unnatural reading of Jerome's testimony in the work *On Famous Men*, will allow us to reconcile all the chronological information at our disposal with a date of 326.
2. We could argue that the work was commenced, the author's use of the present tense implies, in the years of persecution, but completed or revised some twenty years later. This hypothesis does no violence to any of Jerome's statements, and again a non-Varronian reckoning spares us the necessity of proposing a date of inception before 303.
3. Accepting the widespread assumption that a date of inception before 303 is implied by 2.71, but attributing no importance to the use of the present tense, we could surmise that Arnobius wrote the earliest version of his work between 297 and 302, then amplified it for publication in 326, having written no part of it during the era of persecution.
4. Combining (2) and (3), we could suppose that the first edition (largely coterminous with Book 2) was composed in 297 or shortly after, the second between 305 and 311, the third (and now the only extant one) around 326. By this means we could give the most plain and natural sense to Jerome's testimony, to the recurrent use of the present tense in the work, and to the chronological indices that it offers.

This table of possibilities makes no pretence to be exhaustive. Its purpose is to show how the results at which good scholars arrive may differ when there is no consensus even regarding the number of facts to be taken into consideration, let alone regarding the evaluation of any particular fact. The fourth theory is the one that accounts for all the data without any sleight of hand: it postulates an unverifiable history of redaction, but is not open to the charge of ignoring or misrepresenting what it has not explained.

⁷² See M.J. EDWARDS, *Optatus: Against the Donatists*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997, xvi-xviii. AARON JOHNSON, *Eusebius*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2014, 104-112.

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