

Religious and Intercommunal Violence in Alexandria in the 4th and 5th centuries CE

Lauren Kaplow

The fourth and fifth centuries CE were a time of vast social and religious change in the Eastern Roman empire. Going into this time period, Christianity had just begun to be an important player in imperial politics and religious policy, and by the mid-fifth century it had become clearly dominant. The power politics of cities changed as ecclesiastical appointees began to compete with comparable civil officials. The conflicts involved in divisive doctrinal debates spread and then receded. Alexandria, like all eastern cities, was not left unscathed.

This paper deals with three discrete incidents of sectarian violence that occurred in Alexandria in the late fourth and early fifth centuries of the common era. These three incidents (including the build-up to the culminating event) are: the conflict between the Arian bishop George of Cappadocia and the rest of the Alexandrian population resulting in his death in 361 CE, the conflict between the Christians and the Hellenes¹ resulting in the destruction of the Serapeum in 391 CE and the conflict involving Cyril, a Nicene bishop, Orestes, the prefect of Egypt, and the Alexandrian Jews, culminating in the death of Hypatia, a Hellenic philosopher and Neoplatonist, in 415 CE. Alexandria was notoriously easy to provoke into violence,² and as such events were interesting to the ancient historians, they provide more sources for a clear analysis of religious conflict. It is a mistake to place these incidents

¹ I have preferred to use the word Hellenes instead of the word pagan to describe these people. The word “pagan” not only has derogatory connotations but is also entirely inappropriate for urban populations (*paganos* referring to country peasants). They often called themselves Hellenes (Pierre Chuvin, *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans* [Cambridge, 1990] 7) and though it was also used derogatorily in ancient times and is a problematic word itself (having philosophical connotations), it is preferable in this situation.

² Ammianus Marcellinus 16.15, 23 as in Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict*, Ancient Society and History (Baltimore and London, 1997) 11.

into a narrative of the triumph of Nicene Christianity, as Rufinus and Françoise Thélamon have done, though the ultimate result is the same. These incidents display an interplay of relations, and by no means display the one-sided destruction suggested by so many modern sources. If anything, these incidents show how the equal and opposite reactions of Hellenes and Jews and Arians against Nicene Christians incite the Christians to greater aggression in response. This can be seen in a wider and much more influential example of the reign of Julian and the increased intolerance to Hellenes after the Christians regained the emperorship. While a wide variety of tensions (such as religious intolerance, doctrinal conflicts, political power plays and the ability of the citizenry to take matters into their own hands) plant the seed for conflict and are necessary for its inception, conflict occurs and, more importantly, continues and escalates, because of the inability of any party to resist retaliating and to turn the other cheek. To illustrate this principle, it is first important to identify and briefly describe the groups involved. Primary source analysis is crucial, and I will provide a summary of the ancient accounts of the incidents, as well as an evaluation of the sources. Finally, the actions and people involved will be analyzed according to different contributions to violence: the influence of intolerance, the implications of mob violence (including exactly of *whom* this mob was composed), the role of provocation, the effect of imperial policy, the growing power of bishops and, along with that, the political motivations to riot.

Religious communities of Alexandria

Before the incidents can be discussed, some identification of the groups involved is necessary. Alexandria was an extremely multicultural city and had been since its foundation by Alexander the Great in 331 BCE. At that time, it was made up of three main groups: the Greeks, the native Egyptians (who were significantly lower in class than the Greeks) and the Jews, who were given by the Ptolemies their own quarter of the city.³ Christopher Haas, drawing on Philo's observation that one eighth of the population of Egypt was Jewish,⁴ estimates the Jewish population of Alexandria in the first century CE at 25,000.⁵ After the Jewish revolt of 115 CE, especially bloody in Alexandria, the Jewish population was drastically reduced, only recovering in a significant way in the fourth century.⁶ The Jews of Alexandria held a distinct and yet important role, and their continued existence until they were expelled

³ Haas, 95.

⁴ Philo. *In Flacc.* 43 as in Haas, 95.

⁵ Haas, 95.

⁶ Haas, 109.

by Cyril in 415 CE is a testament to Alexandria's ability to foster many cultures while allowing them to stay distinct. Haas emphasizes this quality and uses it as an explanation for the fact that, unlike in Antioch, there were no complaints against "Judaizing" Christians, nor were there any accounts of conversions of Jews to Christianity.⁷ "[Exclusive] communal self-definition" created the environment necessary for strong and distinct parties to have conflict led by local leaders.

Also present in Alexandria, as in all other cities, were the Hellenes. They were not a cohesive group in terms of religious belief, however Haas makes the important point that because of the Christian anti-Hellene attitudes, they evolved into a self-defined community.⁸ Alexandria was both Greek and Egyptian. An important synthesis was made resulting in the tutelary deity of Alexandria: Serapis, an amalgam of Apis, an Egyptian bull-god, Osiris and Greek notions of the deity. Serapis and his temple are continuous with the Hellenic (and Egyptian) tradition of civic gods, and were therefore important to the Hellenes as an expression of their civic identity. On the other hand, Jean Rougé and Jacques Schwartz, among others, argue that there are temple pagans and philosopher-pagans, and that they should not be confused,⁹ although this dichotomy is questionable given the participation of philosophers in the defense of the Serapeum (to be discussed later). This other group of Hellenes they refer to are made up of adherents of such philosophies as some branches of Neoplatonism, more occupied with philosophical issues than sacrificing on a regular basis to receive favour. To give any kind of overall picture of this group is impossible, given the number of temples and cults popular in Alexandria, and also because it was not static over time. Traditional civic gods mingled with mystery cults (such as the cult of Isis, considered by Alexandrians as Serapis' consort) which mingled with such movements as Neoplatonism, Gnosticism and theurgy.

The third major religious group, the Christians, was subdivided into two bitterly opposed factions, the Arians (homoiousians) and the Nicenes (homoousians), and the balance of power between them depended greatly on the religious allegiance of the emperor at the time. This resulted often in dual bishoprics, one officially sanctioned by the emperor and one with his own following nevertheless. The power dynamics of this group evolve over the period of time considered in this investigation more

⁷ Haas, 124-125.

⁸ Haas, 134.

⁹ Jean Rougé, "Politique de Cyrille d'Alexandrie et le meurtre d'Hypatie," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 11 (1990) 501; Jacques Schwartz, "La fin du Sérapéum d'Alexandrie," in *Essays in Honor of C. Bradford Welles*, ed. Alan E. Samuel (New Haven, 1966) 97-111.

than any other, especially as regards imperial support. George enters Alexandria at the behest of the emperor in 356 and 361, while Cyril is clearly in tension with the imperial prefect, Orestes in 415. This change in ecclesiastical-imperial relations is not universal, but does reflect the growing power of the bishops, often at the expense of other urban leaders.

The Sources

Both the perspective from which the historian is writing and the likelihood that the source would have had credible information on the events influence the reading of the sources and their applicability. Ammianus Marcellinus, Sozomen, Socrates and Theodoret wrote on the death of George; Sozomen, Socrates, Rufinus and Theodoret discuss the destruction of the Serapeum and Socrates, John of Nikiu and Damascius include the death of Hypatia in their accounts.

Ammianus Marcellinus was born in Antioch in the 320s or 330s CE. Barnes and Fornara have disputed the positive identification of his birthplace as Antioch based on a letter written to a historian from Antioch of the same name, but Rohrbacher convincingly rejects their opposition.¹⁰ He is a source for only one of the events here considered as his history was published before the second two events, most likely in 390 because he refers to the Serapeum as a building which “stands in eternity.”¹¹ He is a fairly good source for the events of 361 as Rohrbacher places him in Antioch at the time, although it is important to remember that 359 to 363 he was out of imperial service, and would not necessarily have been as informed as he was for other periods of time. He identifies himself as “Graecus” in his *Res Gestae*, which is associated with the Greek word “Hellene,”¹² therefore he is neither biased to the Christian perspective, nor is he likely to have been intimately familiar with ecclesiastical politics.

Socrates, often called Socrates Scholasticus, was born around 380 CE in Constantinople, where he lived for the bulk of his life.¹³ His occupation is not known, as T. Urbainczyk determined that he was likely not a lawyer despite the title “Scholasticus.”¹⁴ Of his written sources, the only extant one which mentions any events being considered is Rufinus, however it’s likely he had access to other

¹⁰ David Rohrbacher, *The Historians of Late Antiquity* (London and New York, 2002) 16.

¹¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* vol. 2, ed. and trans. John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, 1950) 22.16.12; *in aeternum attollit*.

¹² Amm. Marc. 31.16.9, as in Rohrbacher, 24.

¹³ Rohrbacher, 24.

¹⁴ Rohrbacher, 24.

church documents.¹⁵ He was a Nicene Christian, though he is very sympathetic in his *Ecclesiastical History* to other religious groups. He states, in relating his account of the destruction of the Serapeum, that he uses two men under whom he studied as a child and who were present as a source. Helladius and Ammonius, however, are not unproblematic. It is unlikely that someone reputable and truthful would boast, in Constantinople, in the late fourth or early fifth centuries, about having killed nine Christians with his own hands, nor does it seem clear by the Early Church Fathers translation that he himself was present when they spoke about the event, saying: “Helladius boasted in the presence of some”¹⁶ and “Helladius was said to be.”¹⁷ The evidence of Helladius and Ammonius, then, is not iron-clad; Socrates may have gotten his information about the destruction of the Serapeum second-hand and from a man who stretched the truth to amaze impressionable children.

Sozomen was born into a Christian family in a town called Bethelia near Gaza sometime around 380 CE.¹⁸ Rohrbacher thinks it likely that he travelled around much of the Roman East, including Alexandria, and settled in Constantinople possibly later than 426. His history was left unfinished, and it contains a dedication to Theodosius II who died in 450, indicating that his history was promulgated in 458 or 459. His major source was Socrates, although it is clear that in several places he goes beyond the facts that Socrates set down, having his own access to church documents. When Sozomen includes more detail than Socrates, it must be assumed he had access to another source.

Theodoret was born in 393, placing him in a slightly later time period than Socrates and Sozomen.¹⁹ He was raised Christian, chose a monastic life and was later raised to the bishopric of Cyrrhus, from which he participated in a Christological debate opposing Cyril of Alexandria. His *Ecclesiastical History* too must have been published before 450 CE as it refers to Theodosius II ruling contemporarily.²⁰ Theodoret includes several letters in his account not included by either Sozomen or Socrates, so while he may have used them as a source (if they were available to him) he had unique sources as well.

¹⁵ Rohrbacher, 112.

¹⁶ Soc. 5.16.

¹⁷ Soc. 5.16.

¹⁸ Rohrbacher, 7-118.

¹⁹ Rohrbacher, 126-127.

²⁰ Theod. 5.36, as in Rohrbacher, 131.

Rufinus was, like Theodoret, a theologian and involved in ecclesiastical politics as well as a historian. He spent significant amounts of time in Egypt and Alexandria specifically, most likely from 372 or 373 to 380, before joining Melania the Elder in founding a monastery in Jerusalem, where he stayed until 397.²¹ At the time of the destruction of the Serapeum, Rufinus was not far from Alexandria and likely still corresponded with those people with whom he studied just over 10 years before. He is the source nearest in time to the events described, and likely the best informed as well.

Damascius is a much later source than those described above. He was born in the early 460s in Damascus, and came to Alexandria to study under the great Hellenic philosophers in the 480s.²² These philosophers included men who were students of Hypatia herself, such as Isidore. Damascius, then, represents the Hellenic tradition in Alexandria, to whom the death of Hypatia was extremely important, though he writes well-removed from the events.

Even more removed from the events was John of Nikiu, a member of the Coptic (Egyptian) church who wrote in the wake of the Muslim takeover of Egypt in the late 7th century. His account is extremely biased and it seems unlikely he would have had any sources other than tradition and the documents of the Egyptian churches.

Death of George of Cappadocia in 361

By 361, the bishopric of Alexandria had long been a contested position as well as a tool used by both the Arians and the homoousians in their conflicts with each other. Athanasius, the Nicene bishop, had been exiled from Alexandria several times, always to be replaced with an Arian bishop when the emperor favoured the Arians, and then called back when that emperor had been replaced by one favouring the Nicenes. After one such change under Constantius, Athanasius was replaced by the Arian George of Cappadocia in 356.²³ George, according to several sources, both Christian and non-Christian, was a cruel man. Ammianus Marcellinus says of him: “It is said that he often attacked them [the Alexandrians] with his serpent-like bites.”²⁴ His actions in Alexandria caused a mob to rise up

²¹ Rorhbacher, 94; Amidon VII-VIII.

²² Polymia Athanassiadi, “Persecution and Response in Late Paganism: The Evidence of Damascius,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 113 (1993) 19-21.

²³ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, in “Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,” series II, vol. I, <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-02/TOC.htm4.10>.

against him in 358, and he fled, later to be replaced by Gregory.²⁵ In 361 he returned, resuming his persecution of non-Arians and being, in Socrates' words, "exceedingly obnoxious to all classes."²⁶ Sozomen emphasizes as the cause of violence the announcement that Constantius had died and was replaced by Julian, a change eminently favourable to the Hellenes who could expect much more sympathy from a Hellenic emperor than an Arian emperor. The Hellenes, feeling greater freedom, rioted and had him placed in jail. Some time later, the mob broke into the jail and killed George brutally.²⁷ Socrates does not include the change of emperor as a causative force, but instead mentions it as coinciding with the rioting rather than inspiring it. Instead, he explains that George had desecrated pagan mysteries. Haas does not include this explanation in his narrative, surmising that the similarity of these accounts to the onset of the destruction of the Serapeum is so striking that it is likely it only occurred once. He believes that the sequence of events described fits more easily with the events of 391.²⁸ While the events are strikingly similar, Haas assumes too much with no evidence, and there is no reason to leave out events included in two different histories, and excluded from only one, which contains a differing account in any case. Sozomen writes that a spot of desert called Mithra was given to George on which to build a church, and during the construction a subterranean adytum (the inner sanctum of a temple) was found. Discovered inside were statues and "instruments formerly used in Pagan ceremonies, which were of a very strange and ludicrous appearance."²⁹ Socrates, on the other hand, emphasizes that, instead of the name of the geographical location, the site was dedicated to the god Mithra. Again, an adytum was found, but inside it were human remains, skulls especially, of people who had been burned like a sacrificial animal and used as a vehicle for divination.³⁰ In both accounts, objects found in the adytum were exposed and paraded around the city by the Christians. The Hellenes then attacked the Christians, going as far as to crucify some. Interestingly, both historians feel it necessary to specify that it was indeed the Hellenes who were responsible for the attack on the Arians, and not the followers of Athanasius. Sozomen references a letter written by Julian to the Hellenes admonishing them, which Socrates recopies. He admits that there was a report circulating that the mob was made up of homoousians.

²⁴ Amm. Marc. 22.11.4: *vipereis (ut ita dixerim), morsibus ab eo saepius appetiti.*

²⁵ Soz. 4.10.

²⁶ Soc. 3.3.

²⁷ Soz. 5.7.

²⁸ Haas, 293 footnote 36.

²⁹ Soz. 5.7.

³⁰ Soc. 3.2.

Yet another cause is offered by Ammianus Marcellinus. He claims that the immediate cause of the riots was the news that Artemius, not Constantius, had died. Artemius “former military commander of Egypt”³¹ is in this account a provincial official, possibly commanding the army, worked closely with George (both of them being chosen delegates of the emperor). Because the population feared reprisals from Artemius, they took action against George only when Artemius was executed. There is, however, a problem with this interpretation. According to Theodoret, Artemius was executed by Julian because of his actions against idols³² (done in tandem with George). This contrast between the accounts of Ammianus and that of Socrates and Sozomen brings up the issue of the date of the event. If Ammianus is correct, George must have been killed after Julian took power, but if Sozomen and Socrates are correct, it must have happened in November or December of 361, when the news of Constantius’ death was disseminating. To answer this question, the *Historia Acephala* is invaluable. Written by an annalist in Theophilus’ episcopate,³³ it chronicles the life of Athanasius. It gives the date of George’s original capture as “iii Choiaç”³⁴ (Nov. 29) and the date of his death at “the xxviii day”³⁵ (Dec. 24).³⁶ The *Historia Acephala* is extremely meticulous about dates, and is in general corroborated in its dating scheme by the *Festal Letters*, another document, written independently, dealing with this time period.³⁷ Artemius’ death, then, is more accurately placed after the death of George, and Ammianus is incorrect. Ammianus also names two other imperial officials, Dracontius and Diodorus, implied to be in collusion with George in oppressing all non-Arians in the city, who were killed.

Ammianus offers another anecdote which can help us understand the role of religious motivations. George, as he passed by the temple of the Genius of the city, said: “For how long will this sepulcher stand?”³⁸ This offered insult on two grounds: first, it implied that the god of the Hellenes was dead, and second, precisely because it was a civic temple, it called into question the Hellenes’

³¹ Amm. Marc. 22.11.2: *ex duce Aegypti*.

³² Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, in “Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers”, series II, vol. III, <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-03/TOC.htm>3.14.

³³ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Volume IV: St. Athanasius, Select Works and Letters* (Edinburgh and Grand Rapids, 1891) 495.

³⁴ *Historia Acephala*. ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, in “Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,” series II, vol. IV (Edinburgh, 1891) 6.8.

³⁵ *Hist. Aceph.* 6.8.

³⁶ Roman dates calculated from Table C, the Egyptian Year, Schaff p. 501 and corroborated by Christopher Haas “The Alexandrian riots of 356 and George of Cappadocia.,” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* XXXIII (1991).

³⁷ Haas (1991) 496.

sense of civic unity.

The Destruction of the Serapeum in 391

Seen by many Christian writers, such as St. Jerome and Paulinus of Nola, as representative of the triumph of Christianity over other religions, the destruction of the temple devoted to Serapis in Alexandria was used often in the rhetoric of Christians. It indicated, more importantly than a personal religious victory, a civic religious victory, as Serapis was the tutelary deity of Alexandria and a focal point for civic cult.

Theophilus was bishop of Alexandria in 391, and he is mentioned by name by Theodoret and Socrates although not in Rufinus or Sozomen.³⁹ Theodoret offers an abbreviated and significantly differing account, and he will be considered later. Socrates states that Theophilus applied for permission from the emperor to destroy a temple and received it.⁴⁰ For Sozomen and Rufinus, however, the story begins much as did the events of 361, with the desecration of a temple. They state that he was given a temple or a “basilica for public use”⁴¹ to restore, and that he had no previous knowledge of what it contained. As the emperor nowhere else sanctioned the outright and unprovoked destruction of temples, with the possible exception of Cynegius’ actions,⁴² it seems more likely that Rufinus and Sozomen are correct. As with the incidents thirty years before, the Christians quickly discovered that it was a temple. Rufinus does not specify to what god this temple was dedicated, but Sozomen says that it was a temple to Bacchus.⁴³ Socrates states that it was a Mithraeum, but later adds that the Christians displayed the phalli of Priapus, indicating a Bacchic connection.⁴⁴ From this point on, Socrates differs from Sozomen and Rufinus. Socrates states that after the destruction of the Mithraeum, Theophilus went on to destroy the Serapeum and display the objects stored within, raising the ire of the Hellenes. The Hellenes then attacked the Christians at a “preconcerted signal” and the

³⁸ Amm. Marc. 22.11.7: *quam diu sepulchrum hoc stabit?*

³⁹ Theod. 5.2; Soc. 5.16.

⁴⁰ Soc. 5.16.

⁴¹ Ruf. 11.12: *basilica quaedam publici operas.*

⁴² Maternus Cynegius destroyed several temples in the East during his tenure as praetorian prefect. See J.F. Matthews, “A Pious Supporter of Theodosius I: Maternus Cynegius and His Family,” *JTS* XVIII (1967): 438-446; B. Gassowska, “Maternus Cynegius, Praefectus Praetorio Orientis and the Destruction of the Allat Temple in Palmyra,” *Archaeologia* 1982 XXXIII: 107-123.

⁴³ Soz. 7.15.

⁴⁴ Soc. 5.16.

Christians attacked back, “and so the mischief was more augmented.”⁴⁵ At the end of this bloodshed, the Hellenes fled fearing reprisal, many leaving Alexandria.

Sozomen and Rufinus state instead that the Hellenes attacked the Christians after the desecration of the temple of Bacchus only, and that instead of fleeing out of Alexandria, “they fled back to the temple [the Serapeum] as if to a fortress.”⁴⁶ They took Christian hostages with them, whom they tortured, killed, and made to sacrifice to their gods. Both sources also mention a philosopher (or, at least, someone who presented himself as a philosopher) named Olympius,⁴⁷ who led the Hellenes in some way. The Roman government tried to intervene, and Sozomen names Evagrius, the prefect, and Romanus, the general of the Egyptian troops as present.⁴⁸ Eventually, the emperor Theodosius I himself intervened by sending a letter to the citizens of Alexandria. This indicates that the stand-off had been quite long-running, to reach the emperor and allow time for his communication to return to Alexandria. His letter contained the following instructions: that the Christians killed were to be made martyrs, that the Hellenes were not to be pursued for their killing but were to be pardoned, and that the temples were to be destroyed.⁴⁹ Upon hearing this news, the Christians shouted joyfully, and the Hellenes fled, likely believing (reading between the lines, not unjustifiably) that the Christian crowd was ready to forget that the emperor had ordered that no vengeance be taken. Here the narrative rejoins that of Socrates to describe the widespread destruction of temples under the authorities following this event. The accounts of Rufinus and Sozomen are more reliable than that of Socrates in this case. Rufinus was temporally closer to the event, and their mention of Olympius is a detail corroborated by Damascius who was unlikely to have been used as a source by Sozomen or Rufinus, as they have widely differing views of his character.

Theodoret’s version differs greatly from the three described above. He simply states that Theophilus himself destroyed the temple of Serapis and the statue of Serapis within.⁵⁰ While the destruction of the statue is given great importance elsewhere,⁵¹ it is not usually ascribed to Theophilus

⁴⁵ Soc. 5.16.

⁴⁶ Ruf. 11.22: *templum quasi ad arcem quamdam refugiebant.*

⁴⁷ Ruf. 11.22; Soz. 7.15.

⁴⁸ Soz. 7.15.

⁴⁹ Soz. 7.15; Ruf. 11.22.

himself. Theodoret, further removed from the events than any other historian writing about them, cannot be preferred over the account as described above.

Conflicts with the Jews and the Death of Hypatia in 415

The events began in 415, three years after Cyril became bishop of Alexandria. Haas suggests that his unambiguous and hateful attitude towards the Jews arose because of conclusions drawn from his extensive scriptural exegesis. He cites fragments of letters written by Cyril and collected by Robert Wilken including such descriptors for the Jews as “demented,” “God haters,” and “killers of the Lord.” He calls the synagogue “a leprous house which perpetuates their monstrous impiety.”⁵² At the time, Orestes was the prefect of Egypt. He was friendly with Alexandria’s large and established Jewish population. Importantly, he was also friendly with Hypatia, who according to John of Nikiu had “beguiled him through her magic.”⁵³ The accounts of the events, if not the motivations, are fairly consistent between John of Nikiu and Socrates. On Saturdays, the Jewish Sabbath, the Jews were accustomed to watch the dancing displays and create great crowds, according to Socrates. Orestes published an edict controlling these shows, a move unpopular with the Jews. At this assembly to receive the edict was a Nicene Christian named Hierax.⁵⁴ John of Nikiu portrays him as virtuous and blameless, and also implies that he was present at the meeting at Cyril’s behest. Socrates, however, states that Hierax applauded upon hearing of the edict, an act deliberately offensive and provocative. In any case, the Jews objected to his presence and actions, and Orestes, to placate them, had him publicly and corporally punished. Cyril perceived this to be a political action, according to John,⁵⁵ and approached the Jewish leaders with threats. The Jews, in response, conceived of a plan. They identified themselves by rings made of palm branches, and, in the middle of the night, sent up the alarm that a prominent church (the Church of Athanasius according to John, of Alexander according to Socrates) was on fire. As the Christians exited their houses to save their church, they were slaughtered by the Jews. The following morning, the Christians rallied, and drove the Jews out of Alexandria and pillaged their houses

⁵⁰ Theod. 5.12.

⁵¹ See Françoise Thélamon, *Païens et Chrétiens au IVe siècle: L’apport de l’“Histoire Ecclésiastique” de Rufin d’Aquilée* (Paris, 1981) 255-257.

⁵² Haas, 300.

⁵³ John of Nikiu, *The Chronicle*, ed. and trans. R.H. Charles London, (1916) 84-87.

⁵⁴ Soc. 7.13.

⁵⁵ John of Nikiu 84.94.

and synagogues.⁵⁶ The relations between Orestes and Cyril were henceforth undoubtedly antagonistic.

Cyril had, in his youth, lived with the monks of Nitria, and both Socrates and John mention a conflict associated with these monks. Interestingly, Socrates identifies these monks as having been “unjustly armed against Dioscuros” by Theophilus.⁵⁷ John ties the present incursion of the monks in with the conflicts with the Jews (he states that the death of Ammonius, as elaborated below, was another reason Cyril was angry with Orestes and therefore threatened the Jews), while Socrates places it temporally after the expulsion of the Jews. It is unclear as to whether or not they arrived at Cyril’s direct behest, but it is clear that they were violently opposed to Orestes. They accused him of being a Hellene, and one, named Ammonius, threw a rock which hit Orestes’ forehead and caused him to bleed profusely. The population of Alexandria rose to the defense of their prefect and secured Ammonius. Orestes later had him tortured and put to death, although the second unnamed monk that John says was murdered along with him is not mentioned in Socrates’ *Historia*. Cyril, in another overt political act to undermine Orestes had Ammonius declared a martyr, renamed Thaumasius and buried in a church; moreover, he eulogized Ammonius himself.⁵⁸ Socrates points out that even the Christians thought that Ammonius had been out of line, indicating that not all of the Alexandrian Christians supported their bishop wholeheartedly against their prefect. He opines that Cyril’s own sense of being in the wrong led him to not press the issue.

The culmination of these tensions came under the leadership of a man named Peter, a magistrate according to John,⁵⁹ an unofficial leader according to Socrates.⁶⁰ Socrates dates it for us quite precisely: “in the month of March during Lent, in the fourth year of Cyril’s episcopate, under the tenth consulate of Honorius, and the sixth of Theodosius”.⁶¹ This translates to March, sometime after the 3rd, 415 CE. He gathered a mob of Christians, a “multitude of believers in God” according to John, a group “hurried away by a fierce and bigoted zeal” according to Socrates and “a crowd of bestial men, truly abominable” according to Damascius.⁶² This mob went to Hypatia’s house and subjected her to phys-

⁵⁶ John of Nikiu 84.96-98; Soc. 7.13.

⁵⁷ Soc. 7.14

⁵⁸ Soc. 7.14.

⁵⁹ John of Nikiu 84.100.

⁶⁰ Soc. 7.15.

⁶¹ Soc. 7.15.

ical torture: cutting out her eyes as she lived (Damascius⁶³), stripping off her clothes and dragging her to her death (John⁶⁴) or murdering her with tiles and subsequently burning her body (Socrates⁶⁵).

While Damascius agrees with Socrates and John on the events, he does not include the narration of the conflict with the Jews or the monks of Nitria in his digression on Hypatia. He relates the murder directly to Cyril who was jealous of Hypatia, whether for political power or just because of his inferiority is unclear.⁶⁶ While neither Socrates nor John directly relates Cyril to Hypatia's murder, it seems clear that both place this event within the context of the ill-will between Orestes and Cyril. John even goes further and says that the Christians of the city, after the death of Hypatia, proclaimed Cyril "the new Theophilus" and congratulated him for ridding the city of idolaters.⁶⁷

Using the evidence from these three incidents as narrated above, the thematic influences on religious violence (intolerance, the urban crowd, imperial influence, the politics of bishops and the model of provocation and response) will be applied and examined.

Intolerance

Peter Garnsey defines toleration as an active process. In his view, to merely allow other religions to which one objects to continue is not enough for a religious system to be considered tolerant; it should not be confused with "indifference, apathy, or passive acquiescence."⁶⁸ Real tolerance, according to him, is disapproval and the ability to act coupled with an unwillingness to act upon that disapproval stemming from some "moral or political principle."⁶⁹ Not only are such distinctions superficial and unhelpful, they are difficult to apply to ancient history as the specific motivations of the actors are rarely clear. However the attention given to the ability of the religion to act by Garnsey is also important. Religious tolerance is more than the process of not acting upon desires to oppress objectionable religions: it is the ability and position to do so coupled with the lack of such action.

⁶² Damascius, *The Philosophical History*, ed. and trans. Polymnia Athanassiadi (Athens, 1999) 43E.

⁶³ Damascius, 43E.

⁶⁴ John of Nikiu 84.102.

⁶⁵ Soc. 7.15.

⁶⁶ Damascius 43E.

⁶⁷ John of Nikiu 84.103.

⁶⁸ Peter Garnsey, "Religious Toleration in Classical Antiquity," in *Persecution and Toleration*, ed. W. Shields, (Oxford, 1984) 1.

⁶⁹ Garnsey, 1.

In this time period, religious intolerance is extremely hard to separate from political maneuvering. Given the popularity of civic cults such as Serapis and the possibility of Christian attitudes towards the Roman empire as a Christian empire, to separate church from state is a dangerous proposal. There is still some merit in examining how much negative attitudes were born out of religious reasoning, though such analysis can tend towards the speculative.

The Arian and homoousian conflict is brought into relief in the first incident. Sozomen and Socrates both acknowledge that there was some indication that the followers of Athanasius were in the mob that killed George. Considering that Athanasius was, at that time, an exiled bishop with a considerable following, living in the city from which he was banned, and that he resumed the bishopric after George's death, this is not a ridiculous notion. While there are definitely political overtones to the conflict, it would be exceedingly difficult to argue that the Arian schism was unrelated to theological issues. Some conflict in Alexandria must be said to follow this model of Christian intolerance of schism.

George's oppression of the Hellenes, like that of Theophilus, also indicates a measure of religious intolerance on the part of the Christians. While it is true that many other cities allowed the Hellenes to live in peace, Fowden's article on bishops and their influence on destruction of temples points to a trend: when the bishop felt that he had the power to effectuate such change, whether because of the cooperation of imperial officials or because of edicts allowing him personally to proceed, he generally did so.⁷⁰ George and Theophilus both desecrated forgotten temples, exposing the religious artifacts to ridicule and public view. Especially as they seem to have been used for some mystery religion, for which it was generally extremely important to control which people were exposed to what mysteries, this display was sacrilegious and offensive. That both bishops deliberately paraded the items indicates that they had some knowledge of the offense of their actions, and Socrates states outright that Theophilus "exerted himself to the utmost to expose the pagan mysteries to contempt."⁷¹ The question of tolerance on the part of the Christians towards the Hellenes seems settled; at least at the higher levels of Alexandrian society, the fourth and fifth centuries display an entrenched conflict between Hellenes and Christians, though it was not always violently displayed.

⁷⁰ Garth Fowden, "Bishops and Temples in the Eastern Roman Empire A.D. 320-435," *Journal of Theological Studies* 29, no. 1 (1978) 53-78.

Much more interesting for the study of intolerance is the conflict between Cyril and the Jews. While the other groups, such as Hellenes and Christians and Arians and homoousians, had a long history of both political and religious conflicts, the Jews had lived separately, and somewhat peacefully, with Christians all over the empire for several hundred years. Since the revolt including Diaspora Jews in 115, Alexandria's Jewish population got along well enough with the rest of the population, while occasionally getting involved politically in Christian conflicts; for example, during George's bishopric, the Jews firmly supported Athanasius. At the beginning of Cyril's tenure as a bishop, the Jews were seen by the later historians to have had a privileged place in the prefect's favour, but Orestes' actions do not seem to indicate any overweening affinity for the Jews. It is clear that he respected them as citizens for whom he was responsible, but there is no evidence that he treated them preferentially, especially given the passing of the edict that was extremely unpopular with as well as targeted at the Jews. The idea that Cyril may have been acting against them politically seems unlikely, as does the idea that he may have been acting against them in order to conflict with Orestes, as the relationship between Orestes and the Jews is not as cordial as it is portrayed in John of Nikiu.

Cyril's background makes it easy to believe that he began his campaign against the Jews for religiously motivated reasons. He spent many years in the desert as a hermit engaging in biblical exegesis, and had very negative and defined views on the people who he saw to be rejecting their messiah. Cyril's hatred for Jews is, therefore, a much more likely reason for his antagonistic relations with them than any political motivation.

Intolerance did exist between the groups considered, and while it is difficult to isolate it from political motivations, it is likely that it was a factor necessary for violence to take place.

The Urban Crowd

Most of the violence in these events is carried out by the urban crowd, also known as the mob. The murder of George was committed by a mob of Hellenes (and possibly homoousians), the conflict over the Serapeum involved a Christian and a Hellenic mob, the Jews and the Christians each gathered together to fight in 415, a Christian mob threw objects at Orestes and, finally, Hypatia was killed by a

⁷¹ Soc. 5.16.

⁷² Timothy E. Gregory, *Vox Populi: Popular Opinion and Violence in the Religious Controversies of the Fifth Century A.D.* (Columbus, 1979) 9.

Christian mob. Many of the ancient writers believed that the excitability of Alexandrians was at the root of much of the uproar. The content and motivation of ‘the people’ then is an important aspect to the causation of violence. If the mob truly did enjoy spontaneous violence or was confused and easily led by emotions, as the ancient sources would lead us to believe, perhaps no more sinister reasons need to be sought out.

It seems clear from the diversity of motivations that “the mob” was far from a monolithic group. Timothy Gregory defines what the ancient writers referred to as “the people” as those who had “no institutionalized large-scale authority.”⁷² This specification is important because, as he points out, it would be a mistake to see this group as consisting solely and necessarily of the urban poor.

The ancient historians are not especially interested in identifying the mob beyond their religious allegiance, and only in a few cases can we see more specifically of whom the mob is composed. It is interesting to note that, despite the real division between the sacrificing Hellenes and the philosophers, Olympius is clearly someone who identified himself as a philosopher (though Sozomen does not honour him with the title). Ammonius and Helladius, whom Socrates claimed were intimately involved, were also part of the philosophic tradition, being grammarians from whom Socrates learned.⁷³ One needed a certain amount of wealth to be a leisured philosopher, and this involvement on the part of those who were clearly part of the upper class proves the worth of Gregory’s distinction between the reality of who was a member of the mob and the stereotype. Rougé, however, distinguishes between temple Hellenes and philosopher Hellenes in order to argue that Cyril was not interested in oppressing philosophers. While it is possible that this is the case with Cyril (although there is no reason to believe so), the involvement of the philosophers in the Serapeum incident indicates that they were indeed classed with the temple Hellenes by Theophilus.

There is also evidence that the uprising of the Jews was put into motion by upper levels of the community. They decided to massacre the Christians after Cyril made serious threats to their leadership. This leadership, likely Rabbis and other such distinguished community members, would have to have been involved as they were the ones who were made aware of the threat. Unless the Christian

⁷¹ Soc. 5.16.

⁷³ Soc. 5.16.

bias of led them to misrepresent the facts, the Jews specifically planned the murder. A plan such as theirs, including identifying marks on the part of the conspirators, readiness and quiet in the middle of the night and a unified alarm call, indicates a measure of preparedness, levelheadedness and coherence that could only have been achieved through strong leadership. Certainly the mob of Hellenes and possibly the mob of Jews, therefore, contained, or at least was led by, elements of society not usually associated with urban mobs. There were people who, though they had wealth and/or power within their community, lacked official avenues to exert their authority.

Often associated with Christian crowds (by modern authors, at least⁷⁴) are the *parabalani*. Described by Brown as a guild of stretcher-bearers under the authority of the Church which morphed into a kind of militia,⁷⁵ two edicts were published in the Theodosian Code against their appearing at public meetings,⁷⁶ presumably in order to keep the peace. Another group often associated with the mob was the monks. The monks from the monastery of Nitria, where Cyril spent a fair amount of time before becoming bishop, were the main constituents of the crowd which pelted Orestes with rocks, and the one whose rock connected solidly with Orestes' forehead was also a monk. Beyond that, it seems that Theophilus also had some control over these monks, although whether they were involved in the Serapeum incident is unclear. These monks, whether they were specifically dispatched or there by their own free will, did not arrive spontaneously, as Nitria is south past Lake Mareotis, estimated to be 40 miles away,⁷⁷ a fact which is often overlooked in discussion of this incident. There is no justification in the ancient sources regarding their presence in the city at the time. Monks at this time were generally notorious for being violent; Libanius, the Hellenic noble, in his oration *Pro Templis*, specifically talks about monks, the "black-robed tribe" looting and burning shrines.⁷⁸ Rist even claims, somewhat bizarrely, that the killers of Hypatia were monks. He argues that this must be the case because they are described by the fragments of Damascius as beasts, and that "renunciation made them for the average Greek 'either beasts or gods,' as Aristotle puts it."⁷⁹ While I do not feel this is sufficient evidence to characterize the band as monks, it is not impossible that they were involved. The involvement of monks is an important element when considering the control the bishop had over the crowd, to the

⁷⁴ Including Haas (1997), Gregory, Rougé and Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, 1992).

⁷⁵ Brown (1992) 103.

⁷⁶ C. Th. 16.2.42.2, 16.2.42.3 as in Haas, 67.

⁷⁷ Haas, 68; also see the map attached.

extent that the bishops may have employed some kind of militia.

The different ‘mobs’ were therefore composed not only of lower-class urban dwellers, but also upper class, educated Hellenes, Jews and Christians as the case may be. It was not always violent because of spontaneous crowd feeling, with people being swept away and following the group, but it is more likely that mob violence was the result of deliberate planning on the part of the leaders.

Imperial Influence

The extent to which the bishops were following imperial policy is extremely important in determining the reasons for which violence was carried out. If they were indeed following their orders, not much more can be said about the motivations of the Christians. However, as Garth Fowden has convincingly argued, the bishops were not following imperial orders with regards to temple destruction. The first law allowing bishops involvement in the regulation of Hellenes appears in the Theodosian Code in 407/408, significantly later than when George or Theophilus acted.⁸⁰ However, there was a law passed in 392 outlawing both private and public sacrifices, as well as the consultation of oracles.⁸¹ This law specifically mentioned that it was to be enforced by the civic authorities. On the other hand, Maternus Cynegius is an example of the extent to which Theodosius allowed free agents to get away with oppressing Hellenes. In the late fourth century, imperial policy was not to go after the Hellenes (or Jews) unprovoked, and the actions of George, Artemius and Theophilus cannot be explained by following imperial orders. Instead, they acted as far as they were able to get away with. Indeed, the emperors themselves seemed to follow a policy of oppression when violence and instability would not a result as a consequence. Therefore while they were not following orders, they were likely aware that they had to do something drastically against imperial policy to feel any repercussions, from the emperor at least.

⁷⁸ Libanius, *Pro Templis*, in *Libanius: Selected Works*, vol. II. ed. and trans. A. F. Norman. (Cambridge, 1977) 8-11.

⁷⁹ J.M. Rist, "Hypatia," *Phoenix* 19, no. 3 (1965) 222.

⁸⁰ C. Th. 16.10.19 (3) as in Fowden 53.

⁸¹ C. Th. 16.10.12 (4) as in Fowden 55.

The Power of Bishops and Other Politics

H. A. Drake notes that while intolerance underlay Christian coercion, “bishops were a critical factor in determining how a community responded to opportunities or coercion.”⁸² Many of the actions of the bishops which resulted in violence can be seen as devices to gain power, or to protect and assert power already gained. While attributing all motivations of religious leaders to political factors is problematic at best, religious leaders were community leaders in Alexandria, and therefore had to be involved in local communal politics. This is seen especially in the dispute between Cyril and Orestes, for while Cyril acts as a leader to the Christians, the conflict does not involve religious sentiment. It is clear, therefore, that by the beginning of the fifth century, the bishopric had become a position of political leadership as well as an ecclesiastical position.

Orestes twice punished Cyril’s agents: Hierax with corporal punishment and Ammonius with death. Hierax was imputed to have been sent to stir up the crowd, and although it is not mentioned by the ancient sources, it is a possibility that, given his presence at the reading of an unpopular edict by the prefect, he was to stir up the crowd against Orestes. Cyril’s actions glorifying Ammonius after his death must be seen as an act of civil disobedience as Ammonius’ punishment was pronounced lawfully by the prefect. These actions are evidence of a conscious conflict between the two men, in which each used the powers they had to intimidate the other.

Because several of the incidents cannot be adequately explained by the causes given above, they must be attributed to political motivations. Hypatia’s murder, for example, may well have been an act of religious intolerance performed spontaneously by an angry crowd. However, given her connection to Orestes, it seems very possible that her death was in some way orchestrated by Cyril.⁸³ Two of the ancient sources (John of Nikiu and Socrates) place her murder in the narrative of the conflict between Orestes and Cyril. Damascius blames Cyril directly, and claims that his jealousy for Hypatia’s prestige and great character led him to it,⁸⁴ while Socrates states that it was “calumniously reported

⁸² H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore, 2000) 400.

⁸³ Rougé does a detailed analysis of Cyril’s culpability in Hypatia’s death and concludes that, with the evidence we have, he cannot be held directly responsible.

⁸⁴ Damascius 43E.

among the Christian populace”⁸⁵ that Hypatia was the impediment to good relations between the two men. J.M. Rist suggested that Hypatia’s murder occurred because the populace genuinely believed that Orestes was a “pagan idolater,”⁸⁶ which Socrates makes clear was slander, Orestes having been baptized. Rist postulated that the populace would have seen Hypatia as “Maximus of Ephesus to Orestes’ Julian.”⁸⁷ In fact, it seems that the murderers were quite aware that they had nothing to fear from Orestes’ religion, but instead felt threatened that a Hellene philosopher had better relations with the prefect than did the bishop.

Gregory argues that the bishop should be seen as part of the patronage tradition, as he provides spiritual patronage to his clients,⁸⁸ an idea which Brown picks up on and argues extensively in *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire*. Even beyond that, the bishop was a literal patron to the urban poor, as Haas argues that the church was at least partly responsible for the distribution of food to the underprivileged.⁸⁹ Both of these factors indicate how the bishop would have had some control over the laity. As was seen above, they also had at least two parties loyal to them in the crowd, the monks and the *parabalani*.

Communities in Alexandria were defined by their religious ties. Religious leaders were therefore secular leaders as well. Conflicts between different religious groups were not always motivated solely by religious sentiment, but were often caused by political factors. Especially as the bishop’s power began to grow and compete with that of the prefect, the bishop acted for political purposes rather than any reason having to do with the practice of his religion.

Provocation and Response

In every case, the first event in the series that eventually led up to violence and killing was not violent at all. George oppressed the Hellenes in some unspecified way, and ridiculed their sacred objects, as did Theophilus, and a Christian named Hierax misbehaved in a crowd of Jews. While the

⁸⁵ Soc. 7.15.

⁸⁶ Soc. 7.14.

⁸⁷ Rist.

⁸⁸ Gregory, 26.

⁸⁹ Haas (1997), 79.

first two were deliberately provocative, the third may or may not have been. From this beginning, the Hellenes acted directly and killed George. The second incident had the Hellenes attack the Christians, the Christians attack the Hellenes, the Hellenes withdraw to the temple and, eventually, abandon it to the Christians. In the build up to Hypatia's murder, one can count seven separate actions (not including Hypatia's death or Hierax) that followed from Hierax's presence in the crowd. This pattern clearly shows that each action was in response to the one before it, and that each action precipitated action in response.

Most modern and ancient sources have emphasized the eventual crushing of Hellenism by the Christians. Rufinus follows his section on the destruction of the Serapeum with an account of the destruction of the rest of the Egyptian shrines. John of Nikiu congratulates Cyril for Hypatia's death, claiming that he had finally rid the city of Hellenes. Thélamon follows Rufinus in structure, and discusses the downfall of the Hellenes adjacent to the destruction of the Serapeum. Fowden discusses the Serapeum in the context of the eventual destruction and/or cooption of all temples in the east. In fact, no one, with the exception of Haas, has framed the Christian violence within the more general context of Alexandrian intercommunal violence. This absence comes at a price, for the primary causative agent of violence in Alexandria has been largely ignored.

This factor, more than any other, is consistently seen in each of the incidents discussed. While other factors are crucial to both beginning conflict and fostering an environment in which violent response is the norm, this reaction to persecution results in a cycle, for conflict and hatred is created by violence and leads to yet more violence.

Conclusions

To review, during his previous tenure as bishop of Alexandria and then again when he returned in 361, George offered non-Arian Alexandrians many insults, including recently before his death the desecration of unspecified relics, and at the first opportunity when the population felt safe to do so

(after the death of Constantius, his patron), they murdered him. Thirty years later, Theophilus and his followers provoked the Hellenic population, philosopher and simple devotee alike, by similar disrespect of religious artifacts into attacking the Christians, and a battle and siege in the Serapeum followed. Once the Hellenes heard the imperial pronouncement and determined that their hope was lost, they fled, leaving the Serapeum to destruction at the hands of Theophilus. Cyril, Theophilus' nephew, was inspired by his hatred of Jews to provoke them into combat and their subsequent expulsion from Alexandria. In the process, he alienated the prefect Orestes and, whether by his wishes or not, a group of Christians murdered Orestes' close associate Hypatia, a Hellenic philosopher.

While religious intolerance and political motivations did have a role in causing violence, imperial mandates did not justify Christian actions and the spontaneity and madness of the mob is a fabrication. The most striking parallel between all the incidents described, however, is the pattern of violence. In each case there is a back-and-forth volley of violence, which may have not continued had either side stopped the cycle. While it is true that the Christians provoked the other groups first in all cases, and that the Christians prevailed in the end, it would be shortsighted to ignore the dynamic in the middle. The Hellenes and Jews were active participants in the cycle of violence, and provocation and violent response were critical factors in causing and fostering intercommunal violence.

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