

# The Authenticity of the Letters of St Nilus of Ancyra

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THE CORRESPONDENCE of Nilus of Ancyra is a mess and a puzzle. The only available edition is Migne's inaccurate reprint (PG 79 [1865] 81–581) of the only (more or less) complete edition ever published, that of Leo Allatius (Rome 1668). And the recent researches of J. Gribomont have admirably demonstrated how arbitrary and unsatisfactory was Allatius' treatment of a complex yet basically soluble manuscript tradition<sup>1</sup> (see below, p.191). A proper critical text is urgently needed, but even so it is not in further detailed study of the mss that the major problems will find their solution.

Most were fully and fairly set out by K. Heussi in his indispensable *Untersuchungen* of 1917.<sup>2</sup> Many of these so-called letters are intolerably short, abrupt and impersonal, a bare scriptural quotation and a word of commentary, some consisting of only one sentence. Often the mss present as a series of separate letters with fresh headings what would appear to be the consecutive paragraphs of a single letter. No less often, on the other hand, such snippets recur verbatim or nearly so in other letters. The two most startling examples are *Ep.* 3.33 to Thaumasius, which contains material reappearing in *fourteen* other letters;<sup>3</sup> and what Heussi christened the '53-chapter letter' (quoted in a number of mss though not printed as such in any edition), no fewer than 52 chapters of which reappear in or as other letters!<sup>4</sup> In both these cases Heussi argues, probably rightly, that the longer documents were put together out of the shorter rather than *vice versa*. Either way the consequences are disturbing. Even more disturbing, a large number prove to be extracts from other writings of Nilus and (worse) other writers altogether, in particular, Irenaeus, Athanasius, the two

<sup>1</sup> "La tradition manuscrite de saint Nil: 1. La correspondance," *Studia Monastica* 11 (1969) 231–67 (hereafter, GRIBOMONT).

<sup>2</sup> *Untersuchungen zu Nilus dem Asketen (Texte und Untersuchungen, III Reihe, XII.2, Leipzig 1917)* 31–117 (hereafter, HEUSSI).

<sup>3</sup> Heussi 41f, Gribomont 252.

<sup>4</sup> Heussi 44f, Gribomont 248–51.

Gregories and Basil, Isidore of Pelusium and, above all, John Chrysostom.<sup>5</sup>

On the most favourable verdict Nilus proves to be a very lazy correspondent, apparently content to send his many friends extracts from his own and others' writings without any personal matter, not even bothering how often he sent out the same letters. More sceptical scholars have preferred to describe it as nothing more than a moral florilegium, merely embellished with some of the external trappings of a correspondence.

Heussi's sympathetic and balanced defence of the corpus (now generally approved) certainly deserves careful study.<sup>6</sup> But it is doubtful whether it can explain everything; and if it cannot explain everything, is it an explanation at all? That is to say, if we are going to have to allow a certain amount of 'editorial' intervention in any case, there is no clear case for supposing it to have been minimal rather than substantial.

The most disturbing feature of the whole correspondence has yet to be unmasked. The wide circle of Nilus' friends has never failed to impress. Gribomont has recently written most warmly of Nilus' importance as a witness to his age—"son témoignage est surtout intéressant parce qu'il est concret, bien situé et daté. Ne fût-ce que pour la prosopographie byzantine du V<sup>e</sup> siècle, la liste de plusieurs centaines de correspondants, dont les noms sont accompagnés souvent du titre de leur fonction civile ou ecclésiastique, donnerait du prix à la collection."<sup>7</sup> Alas, many of these imposing titles did not exist in Nilus' day.

According to Heussi's cautious assessment of the evidence, Nilus died *ca* A.D. 430. Now *Ep.* 2.372 bears the heading Ἰσιδώρω ἐξκουβίτορι. The *excubitores* (a crack guards regiment) were formed in the reign of Leo (457–474).<sup>8</sup> *Ep.* 2.204 is headed Οὐάλεντι κκριβωνι.

<sup>5</sup> Heussi 45–62; for some further quotations from the Cappadocians, see Gribomont 247–48.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, J. Quasten, *Patrology* III (Utrecht/Antwerp 1960) 498 [hereafter, QUASTEN], though Christ-Schmid-Stählin, *Gesch. d. griech. Literatur* II<sup>6</sup> (Munich 1924) 1471, were unconvinced, and voiced the suspicion that a closer study would reveal inauthentic material (on this point see below, p.193).

<sup>7</sup> Gribomont 265.

<sup>8</sup> R. I. Frank, *Scholae Palatinae* (American Academy, Rome 1969) 204f. It is true that the word itself is found much earlier meaning 'sentry' (*TLL* V.2, 1288), and even of an imperial guard: Suet. *Claud.* 42.1, and even two fourth-century examples, Lactant. *De mort.pers.* 30.4 and Amm.Marc. 20.4.21. Whether or not it was a term applied to praetorians in the early

The *scribiones* (an officer corps of the excubitors) are first attested in 545.<sup>9</sup>

No less certainly anachronistic are the *vindices* Dracontius (2.327) and Martyrius (2.282). The *vindex*, an official who superintended tax collection in the cities, was unquestionably a creation of Anastasius. The earliest known date from 512.<sup>10</sup>

*Ep.* 2.319 is headed *Νέρωνι μαγίστρω καὶ ἀπὸ ὑπάτων*, *Epp.* 3.62–63 Ἀκύλα ἀπὸ ὑπάτων. No Nero or Aquila held the ordinary consulship during this period, and (the suffect consulship being out of the question<sup>11</sup>) the only possibility left is the honorary consulship, a rank first attested under and doubtless created by Zeno (474–491).<sup>12</sup>

*Ep.* 2.243 is addressed to a Cyprianus *διληγάτωρ*, i.e. *delegator*. We first meet this official in the West, in Cassiodorus, *Variae* 1.18, concerned with the assignment of land to barbarians in the 490's; in the East not till Justinian, *Novel* 130 of A.D. 545, as an overseer of supplies for troops in transit. Then there is the *ρογάτωρ* of 2.314, presumably an *erogator*, 'paymaster', not known before Anastasius (491–518).<sup>13</sup> *ἀντικλήνωρ*, *antecessor*, in the sense of 'professor of law' (1.192–94) is not found before Justinian.<sup>14</sup>

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empire (Fiebiger, *RE* 6 [1909] 1577), in the two latter examples it appears to be used informally as a general (perhaps literary) word for 'guard' (Ammianus proceeds to reveal that the guards he has in mind are the *domestici*, and he was probably influenced in his choice of word by the curious coincidence that their commander was actually called *Excubitor*!); *excubitor* was not in Nilus' day an official title to be transliterated into Greek.

<sup>9</sup> E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire* II (Paris 1949) 446 n.1 [hereafter, STEIN], rightly observed that the title of Nilus' letter could not be authentic. It was accepted without qualms, however, by J. B. Bury, *Imperial Administrative System in the Ninth Century* (London 1911) 58, and is not mentioned in A. H. M. Jones' account, *The Later Roman Empire* 284–602 III (Oxford 1964) 203 n.118 [hereafter, JONES].

<sup>10</sup> Stein II 210–11; Jones III 42 and 122 n.111.

<sup>11</sup> Suffer consulships seem never to have existed at Constantinople and were no longer prominently recorded at Rome either: A. Chastagnol, "Observations sur le consulat suffect et le préture du Bas-Empire," *RHist* 219 (1958) 235 (with the reservations of M. T. W. Arnheim, *The Senatorial Aristocracy in the Later Roman Empire* [Oxford 1972] 12f) and Chastagnol, *Le Sénat romain sous le règne d'Odoacre* (Bonn 1966) 55.

<sup>12</sup> Stein II 68–69; C. Courtois, "Ex-consul: observations sur l'histoire du consulat à l'époque byzantine," *Byzantion* 19 (1949) 37f; R. Guiland, "Le consulat byzantin," *Byzantion* 24 (1954) 545f. There is no basis for T. D. Barnes' recent suggestion (*Phoenix* 29 [1975] 162) that honorary consuls might go back to ca 437. The *ὑπατικός* Plotinus (1.51–53) is probably a mere *consularis*, a provincial governor (cf. Marcus Diac. *V. Porph.* pp.63.2, 99.7 Grégoire-Kugener, and, for inscriptions, E. Hanton, *Byzantion* 4 [1927] 133), perfectly acceptable at this period.

<sup>13</sup> *TLL* V.2, 799.

<sup>14</sup> Jörs, *RE* 1 (1894) 2347–48.

Less certainly anachronistic are the *spatharius* Sisinnius (1.277) and the *referendarii* Theoctistus (2.1–3) and Hyacinthus (3.83–84). Spathars are not attested before the 440's,<sup>15</sup> referendaries first in 427.<sup>16</sup>

More problematic are the four men styled *κουράτωρ* (Amblichus, or perhaps Iamblichus, 2.179; Aglaphon, 2.222; Phalcon, 2.295; Chrysippus, 3.177). From the middle of the sixth century onwards *curator*, *tout court*, would most naturally be taken as an abbreviation of the illustrious rank of *curator dominicae domus*, first certainly attested in 531.<sup>17</sup> There are a couple of other earlier examples: the Helladius addressed as such in Theodoret, *Ep.* 46, written some time probably between the 420's and 440's, and the Elias acclaimed by the orthodox of Tyre in 518, 'Ἡλία κουράτορος πολλά τὰ ἔτη, in *Acta Conc. Oec.* 3.86,23. They could all be holders of the more modest office of *curator civitatis*, which would not be an anachronism. But the problem with Nilus' *curatores* is that *curator civitatis* is normally represented by *λογιστής*, or (later) by *πατήρ πόλεως* in Greek,<sup>18</sup> and there is another letter of Nilus addressed to a *πατήρ πόλεως*, the Demosthenes of 2.36.

Of course, if there were no doubts about the authenticity of the correspondence, no one would hesitate to accept Nilus as our first evidence for (say) spathars and referendaries. Nor is it impossible that even *erogatores* or *delegatores* existed this early. But it would be an odd coincidence if all these titles happened to occur for the first time in Nilus.

There are other cases where there is no positive anachronism but a certain improbability nonetheless, as with 2.221 to Eurycles the patrician. The patriciate was very sparingly bestowed in Nilus' lifetime—though, like the honorary consulship, it was to become relatively common by the sixth century. The six patricians known during Nilus' lifetime in the early fifth-century East had all been prefects, generals or consuls;<sup>19</sup> nothing else is known of this Eurycles. Nor is there any parallel this early for ladies bearing the title of count, *κομήτιςσα* (Iulia, 2.213; Stephanis, 2.218).

The excubitors, *scribones*, *vindices* and honorary consuls alone are decisive. Unless we have got his dates very wrong indeed, Nilus cannot

<sup>15</sup> Jones III 162 n.7 (a couple of earlier western examples are not the same thing: cf. Th. Mommsen, *Gesammelte Schriften* [Berlin 1910] VI 454).

<sup>16</sup> Jones III 166 n.24.

<sup>17</sup> Jones I 426; III 103 n.39.

<sup>18</sup> Jones II 726; J. and L. Robert, *BullEpigr* 1965, no.419, pp.171–72.

<sup>19</sup> Jones II 534, III 155 n.28; Barnes, *Phoenix* 29 (1975) 167.

have written these letters—or at any rate the titles. And we cannot have his dates that much wrong, since on the *prima facie* evidence of the correspondence he wrote to the Gothic general Gainas, killed in 400, and the emperor Arcadius (2.265, 279), who died in 408 (see below).

We could of course, simply exclude the (relatively few) letters with anachronistic titles. But that would be a very questionable method. These happen to be the only titles that are demonstrably anachronistic. If I am not mistaken, not one of the host of other titles borne by Nilus' supposed correspondents—*candidati*, *domestici*, *protectores*, *silentiarii* and some thirty others—had fallen out of use by the sixth century. Not one *has* to belong to the early fifth. How then can we be sure that any are authentic? If the editor that we are now bound to postulate invented this many titles, might he not equally have invented them all?

Heussi himself drew attention to two headings which cannot have been original. *Ep.* 3.4, *Μαρτίνῳ πλουσίῳ γέροντι φιλοπόρνῳ*, and 1.54, *Αὐρηλιανῶ ἰλλουστρίῳ ἀπὸ Ἑλλήνων*. Nothing in the letters suggests either that Martin was rich or that Aurelian had been a pagan—nor is it easy to believe that 'whorelover' formed part of the actual address of Martin's letter.<sup>20</sup> Heussi, however, found this reassuring rather than the reverse. Such information, he argued, must derive from a person who *knew* the men in question; proof, he thought, that the editing of Nilus' correspondence, even if done by someone other than Nilus himself, must at least be placed in or near Nilus' lifetime.<sup>21</sup>

But there are many other such headings where this is not at all the obvious explanation: those where the description that follows the name appears to be nothing more than a guess from the contents of the letter. There are some where it is difficult to be sure: for example, 2.260 to 'Basilius the businessman' on the evils of business; 2.263 to 'Symmachus the vegetable seller' on food; 2.264 to 'Aphrodisius the philosopher' on philosophy; 2.266 to 'Dioscoria the widow' on widowhood; 3.24 to 'Asclepius the grammaticus' and 3.10 to 'Elpidus the goldsmith', where their profession is made clear by the letters. These are all perfectly reasonable headings that would certainly help the

<sup>20</sup> Papyrus letters (as one would expect) are normally folded and the address written on one side of the packet formed by the blank *verso*.

<sup>21</sup> "Die Sammlung der Briefe bis in die Zeit der Entstehung der Briefe zurückreichen muss," p.68.

postman, though it must be counted a little suspicious that in each case (and there are many similar) the relevant information should be contained in the letter. But there are a number of less helpful headings that can hardly be Nilus' own: for example 1.67, 'to the monk who used to be a soldier' (guessable from the letter); and three more similar, 3.49, 56 and 73 to monks who used to be, respectively, a schoolmaster, a lawyer and a rhetor. Then there is 2.267 'to Crispus the ex-captive', dealing (surprise!) with his recent ransom from captivity among 'impious barbarians' (presumably the Persians, and so to be dated soon after Theodosius II's Persian War of 421–22). Nor do 'to Lucian the Christian sophist' (2.224) or 'to Carpio the follower of the Valentinian heresy' (1.234) look like genuine addresses, still less 3.171 'to Quintus the subdeacon who had lapsed (*περόντι*)', 3.228 'to Terentius the deacon who had lapsed and long afterwards made a worthy repentance', or 3.243, 'to Charicles the presbyter, who was very strict with backsliders and insisted that confession was not enough for repentance'. These are more in the nature of editorial lemmata than addresses proper.

Now we have already seen that some at least of the addresses cannot have been added before the sixth century, and the batch just discussed are at any rate not the original addresses of Nilus. Is it really likely that the original addresses were tampered with twice, once shortly before or after Nilus' death, when the correspondence was being assembled, and then again a century or so later? Is it not more natural and economical to assume that the false titles and what are surely no more than the idle guesses about Martin and Aurelian were both added at the same time, quite possibly when the corpus was being assembled, at least in its present form—but in the sixth rather than the fifth century? (On the date, see further below.)

It seems almost perverse to deny a connection between the two most suspicious features of the correspondence; the false addresses and the disjointed, impersonal nature of so many of the letters. Both are the work of our 'editor', the two sides of the same forged coin. Anxious to improve on what he presumably felt to be an inadequate stock of letters by Nilus, he expanded his material by the crude device of breaking up the larger genuine letters and equipping them with what he considered appropriate looking headings. Nilus was thus provided with a correspondence more on a par with those of the other great eastern Fathers—and a more impressive circle of friends.

The existence of this sixth-century editor must, I think, be accepted, even if the precise nature and extent of his activity may have to remain uncertain. But it may be suggested that, provided we ignore his additions to the letter headings and the more obvious false letter divisions, no argument has so far been produced why we may not continue to regard the correspondence itself as basically authentic. This (as we shall see) is a question that requires careful formulation. Before we are in a position to tackle it we must submit the few apparently datable letters to a more critical scrutiny than they have so far received.

Only three of Nilus' correspondents are known from other sources. The emperor Arcadius, Gainas the Goth, and a general called Candidianus (2.245). Candidianus may reasonably (though not certainly) be identified with the general of that name attested in 425, or perhaps the *comes domesticorum* who was an imperial representative at the Council of Ephesus in 431.<sup>22</sup> Nothing in the letter contradicts this assumption.

Nor is there anything obviously suspicious about the two letters to Arcadius (2.265 and 279). *Ep.* 2.265 indeed seems faultlessly circumstantial. Nilus tells the emperor that he will not pray for relief from the earthquakes then troubling Constantinople until the exiled patriarch Chrysostom is restored. The reference must be to Chrysostom's second exile, which lasted from June 404 to his death on 14 September 407. Now there was an earthquake at Constantinople on 1 April 407 (*Chron.Min.* 2.69). The letter presupposes that Chrysostom is still alive; *prima facie*, then, it was written between April and September 407. A forger so careless of anachronism is scarcely likely to have taken such pains to forge so plausible a context. We may surely presume that this letter at least is genuine. So far so good.

The eight letters to Gainas (1.70, 79, 114–16, 205–06, 286) *look* no less plausible. They attack Arianism, and we know that Gainas was an Arian. Nonetheless, one at least of them, 1.286, is *prima facie* an outright forgery.

*Ep.* 1.286 is one of the 45 letters borrowed from the *oeuvre* of Chrysostom. It is a miniature sermon on *Hebrews* 1.3, palpably drawing on Chrysostom's homily thereon (*PG* 63, 22). Of this there can be no doubt. To start with, it is clearly from Chrysostom that the letter derives its improbable and absurd idea of interpreting *Hebrews* as a

<sup>22</sup> *PLRE* II (forthcoming), s.v. Candidianus 2 and 4.

preëmptive attack on Arianism and sundry other heresies. Then, like Chrysostom, it goes on to quote *John* 8.12, ἐγώ εἰμι τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου, followed by the words φῶς ἐκ φωτός, and concludes by copying its last sentence almost verbatim from Chrysostom:

CHRYSOSTOM. ὁ γὰρ χαρακτήρ  
ἄλλος τίς ἐστι παρὰ  
τὸ πρωτότυπον· ἄλλος δὲ  
οὐ πάντῃ ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸ  
ἐνυπόστατον εἶναι.

NILUS. ὁ χαρακτήρ  
ἄλλο τίς ἐστι παρὰ  
τὸ πρωτότυπον· ἄλλο δὲ  
οὐ πάντῃ ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸ  
ἐνυπόστατον.

This is not in itself a decisive argument against authenticity. What is decisive is the fact that Chrysostom's *Homilies on Hebrews* were written at least three years after Gainas' death. Both dates are known with certainty: Gainas died in 400 and the *Homilies on Hebrews* were composed in 403/4 and published after Chrysostom's death from shorthand notes by a priest of Antioch, called Constantine.<sup>23</sup> F. Degenhart desperately argued that, as a close associate of Chrysostom, Nilus could have had advance knowledge of his interpretation of *Hebrews*.<sup>24</sup> This is a hypothesis that might have merited consideration (a) if we had any real evidence for this supposed close association with Chrysostom, rather than a dubious and in other respects certainly erroneous notice in the eighth-century chronicle of George the Monk;<sup>25</sup> and (b) if there were no other grounds for suspicion. As things are, we are surely bound to acknowledge the telltale slip of the forger. Wanting a notorious Arian contemporary of Nilus as the addressee for an attack on Arianism, he chose Gainas, whose Arianism, as manifested in a famous clash with Chrysostom, is prominently recorded in all the ecclesiastical histories.<sup>26</sup>

*Ep.* 2.114 is something of a puzzle. It is addressed to Nikandros the Stylite, reproaching him in the strongest terms for the folly and vanity of his undertaking, underlined with an apt quotation: καὶ ὁ ὑμῶν ἐαυτὸν ταπεινωθήσεται (*Mt.* 23.12; *Lk.* 14.11; 18.14)! Now Nilus' lifetime falls a little early for a stylite. The first of the breed was the great Symeon, who did not clamber onto his first pillar till about 422, and

<sup>23</sup> Quasten, III 450, and (for Gainas), *PLRE* I p.380.

<sup>24</sup> *Der Hl. Nilus Sinaita (Beiträge zur Geschichte des alten Mönchtums* 6, Münster 1915) 16–17.

<sup>25</sup> For the details see Heussi 11–16.

<sup>26</sup> Socrates, *HE* 6.5.8; Sozomen, *HE* 8.4.6–10; Theodoret, *HE* 5.32–33.



not onto the tall one on which he spent his last 30 years till 429.<sup>27</sup> Nilus' chronology being (*pace* Gribomont) somewhat approximate, we cannot rule out the possibility that he lived into the 430's and got to know an early follower of Symeon. Even so it would remain surprising that we have no other information about this Nikandros.

Yet the letter itself does contain at least one pointer to authenticity. We know from an interesting passage of the *Life of Daniel the Stylite* (§7) that in the early days of Symeon's elevation, pillar squatting was sharply criticized in monastic circles. *Ep.* 2.114 would be a plausible enough letter for a monk to have written in the late 420's or 430's. There may be something to be said for accepting the letter as genuine and concluding that Nikandros escaped fame and biographers either by dying young or by renouncing his 'aerial penance', perhaps chastened by Nilus' rebuke.

No mention has been made so far of the two best known of Nilus' letters: 4.61 to Olympiodorus the Prefect on the proprieties of church decoration and 4.62 to Heliodoros the Silentiary mentioning icons of St Plato of Ancyra, both known to us only from quotation in the iconoclast controversy.<sup>28</sup> The fact that neither is transmitted along with the rest of the corpus of Nilus' letters has naturally given rise to some doubt about their authenticity.<sup>29</sup>

The reference to the icons of the obscure local saint Plato of Ancyra points to a man who had lived in Ancyra (such icons did not normally travel, except in the possession of Ancyrenes).<sup>30</sup> A better argument than it might seem in the light of the later but dominant false tradition (based on the certainly forged *Narrationes*)<sup>31</sup> which placed Nilus' monastery on Sinai.

The letter to Olympiodorus is at any rate not an iconoclast forgery, since to suit their case the iconoclasts suppressed a damaging paragraph allowing the representation of biblical scenes and substituted an injunction to whitewash church walls.<sup>32</sup> The interpolation was

<sup>27</sup> H. Delehaye, *Les saints stylites* (*Subsidia Hagiographica* 14, Paris/Bruxelles 1923) x ff.

<sup>28</sup> For details see my paper "A Quotation from S. Nilus of Ancyra in an Iconodule Tract," *JThS* 27 (1976) 128–31.

<sup>29</sup> See Heussi 77–80 and Gribomont 254–55 and 261, both cautiously concluding in their favour.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Brown, *EHR* 88 (1973) 19.

<sup>31</sup> Heussi 123ff, 91; cf. Quasten 496f. The most explicit evidence for Ancyra is the title τοῦ ἁγίου Νείλου τοῦ ἀσκητοῦ τοῦ ἐν Ἀγκύρα τῆς Γαλατίας in *Ottob.gr.* 250, f.38<sup>r</sup> (cf. Gribomont 234).

<sup>32</sup> See G. Millet, *BCH* 34 (1910) 99.

triumphantly unmasked at the second Council of Nicaea in 787; the correct text was formally read out from two different exemplars.<sup>33</sup>

There are also art-historical grounds for placing the letter (like 2.114) at any rate in Nilus' lifetime. The prefect (ἐπαρχος— ? of Constantinople) had evidently given Nilus a full account of the décor he was proposing for his church, a striking mixture of pagan and Christian themes. What Nilus took particular exception to was the projected hunting scenes, "snares being stretched on the ground, fleeing animals such as hares, gazelles, and others, while the hunters, eager to capture them, pursue them with their dogs . . . every kind of fish being caught . . . pictures of different birds and beasts, reptiles and plants."<sup>34</sup> Now precisely this mixture of Christian themes and hunting scenes with elaborate animal and bird decoration can be paralleled from two remarkable mid-fourth century mausolea, Sta Constanza in Rome<sup>35</sup> and the so far unidentified mausoleum (perhaps of Constans I) at Centumcellae in Spain.<sup>36</sup>

At this date the mixture is not surprising. Wealthy Roman patrons had always liked hunting scenes, and what was good enough for their palaces was good enough for their churches. But half a century later the Church had managed to impose its own taste on its patrons, so that (in H. Stern's words) "l'art chrétien prend un aspect plus sévère."<sup>37</sup> There are no such frivolities in any fifth-century church mosaics we know of.

Olympiodorus was the sort of patron who still hankered after the old classicizing themes; and Nilus the sort of churchman who was concerned to make the Church's position clear. Nilus' letter was not just a reply to Olympiodorus; like so many of the letters of the church fathers it was intended for wider circulation, to provide general guidance on church decoration. What Nilus says of the value of Old and New Testament scenes on church walls for the illiterate

<sup>33</sup> J. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio* xii (Florence 1766, repr. Paris 1901) 31–38.

<sup>34</sup> From the translation by Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1435: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs [N.J.] 1972) 34.

<sup>35</sup> H. Stern, "Les mosaïques de l'église de Sainte-Constance à Rome," *DOPapers* 12 (1958) 159–218. L. Bréhier, *L'Art chrétien* (Paris 1918) 62–63, connected Nilus' letter with Sta Constanza but dated Nilus according to the false biographical data in the *Narrationes*.

<sup>36</sup> T. Hauschild and H. Schlunk, "Vorbericht über die Arbeiten in Centcelles," *MadrMitt* 2 (1961) 119–82.

<sup>37</sup> *DOPapers* 12 (1958) 214; E. Demougeot, *Atti del VI Congresso Internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana* (Ravenna 1962) 511.

is strikingly echoed in what Paulinus writes of the church he built at Nola soon after 400.<sup>38</sup> A late fourth or early fifth-century date seems just right—an important conclusion, but naturally falling short of proof that it was actually written by Nilus.

That both 4.61 and 62 should be absent from the main corpus of Nilus' letters is less worrying than might appear. The main outlines of the ms tradition are now clear.<sup>39</sup> One ms, *Ottob.gr.* 250 (XI s.), bears witness to a collection in three books. Book I is unfortunately missing but evidently contained 329 letters, since Book II begins with a letter (headed τῶ ἀντῶ) numbered 330. This numeration continues up to letter 605, and then there is a break until the first letter of Book III, which is numbered 706.<sup>40</sup> These numbers obviously derive from the exemplar of *Ottob.*; since the letters are here presented as in Allatius (and so Migne), it follows that the false subdivision of the longer letters goes back at any rate to this exemplar. There are 698 letters in the two extant books, giving a total for all three of 1027. In addition, a variety of mss carry two considerably rearranged anthologies containing 214 and 355 letters respectively. It is clear from a comparison of their contents and arrangement that both are extracts from a fuller common source, itself another anthology based (it would seem) on the three-book edition.

There are good reasons for supposing that this three-book edition is (at least in essentials) the original edition of Nilus' correspondence. *Epp.* 2.54, 55, 57, 60, 63, 64, 65, 68, 69 and 70 appear both as letters in the *Ottob.* and as sections of Nilus' *Asketikos* (*de Monastica Exercitatione*)—in both places in the same order. Then there are 2.284, 290, 296, 298, 307, 308, 310, 312, 313 and 317, a series of extracts, in that order, from the same homily of Chrysostom, *De Davide et Saule* 3 (*PG* 54, 695–708). Heussi (approved by Gribomont but not by Quasten)<sup>41</sup> argued that in the case of the first group the material in the letters was later reused for the *Asketikos*, despite the fact that it was necessarily the reverse

<sup>38</sup> *Carmen* 27.511, cf. 28,171f, with R. G. Goldschmidt, *Paulinus' Churches at Nola: Texts, Translations and Commentary* (Amsterdam 1940).

<sup>39</sup> I am, of course, entirely dependent here on the excellent pioneer work of Gribomont.

<sup>40</sup> The original book division of the *Ottob.* was quite arbitrarily broken up and rearranged by Allatius (followed by Migne), so that *Ottob.* Book II became Allatius' 1.1–333 and 2.1–42; *Ottob.* Book III = Allat. 2.43–333 and 3.1–32; the rest of Allat. 3 and his 4 are built up from a variety of sources, meticulously tracked down by Gribomont 261–62. It will be noted that he gave each of his first three books 333 letters.

<sup>41</sup> Quasten III. 499, Gribomont 247.

procedure that produced the second group. (What one decides obviously depends on one's view of the correspondence as a correspondence. I, for one, find it hard to believe that Nilus excerpted ten passages consecutively from the homily of Chrysostom he happened to be reading at the time and then sent them off in the same order to ten people he happened to be writing to at the time, regardless of what the correspondents in question had originally asked him. In short, I doubt whether 2.284f are genuine letters at all.)

However that may be, the coincidences in sequence between the correspondence as arranged in the *Ottob.* and the other works (and there are other, less striking examples)<sup>42</sup> must be a direct reflection of Nilus' sources one way or the other. Of the letters in question, only 2.65 and 70 appear in the 355-letter collection, in reverse order. The 355 and 214-letter collections both contain letters absent from Books II and III of the *Ottob.*, which we may presume to have once formed part, though only a part, of its now lost Book I. So it is perfectly possible, even probable, that 4.61 and 62 and others of the small number of 'extravagantes' (including a hitherto unknown but authentic looking letter to 'Achillius the deacon' first published by Gribomont)<sup>43</sup> originally appeared in Book I, whence 4.61 and 62 were excerpted during the iconoclast controversy. To quote an almost contemporary parallel, several important letters of Theodoret of Cyrrihus are known to us only from the *Acta* of church councils. In this case too only a part of the original corpus of his letters has come down to us, since many more than we now have were read by Nicephorus Callistus in the fourteenth century.<sup>44</sup>

It is difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at any clear cut verdict on the correspondence as a whole. According to J. Quasten,<sup>45</sup> "it is homogeneous and basically genuine; it does actually go back to Nilus

<sup>42</sup> Heussi 50f, Gribomont 247–48.

<sup>43</sup> Gribomont 252–61.

<sup>44</sup> See Y. Azéma, *Théodore de Cyr: correspondance I* (*Sources chrétiennes* 40, Paris, 1955) 1f. It is customary (e.g. Quasten, Gribomont) to compare the vicissitudes of Nilus' correspondence to those of the letters of Isidore of Pelusium, on which see (pending a critical edition) C. H. Turner, "The Letters of Saint Isidore of Pelusium," *JThS* 6 (1905) 70–86 (with K. Lake, *ib.* 270–82), and M. Smith, "The Manuscript Tradition of Isidore of Pelusium," *HThR* 47 (1954) 205–10, with a summary of the position in Quasten 182. I suspect that the similarities will turn out to be less close than has often been imagined when all the details have been worked out. There does not, for example, appear to be any element of forgery involved in the case of Isidore.

<sup>45</sup> Quasten III 498.

and began as his authentic correspondence. The first collector must have lived in his neighbourhood and was perhaps a member of his monastic community at Ancyra. In the course of time repeated revisions added a number of letters and intruded spurious elements.” But this idea of the gradual accretion of spurious elements, while reasonable enough in itself, is a hypothesis for which there is no real evidence in the corpus,<sup>46</sup> and is in any case simply irrelevant to the major questions of authenticity here formulated. There may well be a few letters here and there that have crept in by mistake, but 1.286 is not someone else’s letter to Gainas mistakenly attributed to Nilus; it is a deliberate forgery. The point about the homogeneity of the correspondence is certainly well made. None of the *material* contained in the letters that fall under suspicion of anachronism shows any sign of being later than Nilus’ lifetime, or alien to his style and interests. Gribomont has collected one or two verbal idiosyncrasies that run right through the correspondence.<sup>47</sup> The anachronisms all appear in the *headings* of the letters, not in their contents.

There is certainly an element of forgery involved. But how far does it go and what was its point? Our editor made up titles for many of Nilus’ correspondents, yet he did not give him a particularly distinguished circle. Apart from Gainas and Candidianus, none of the generals, prefects and *virii illustres* he writes to are known from elsewhere.<sup>48</sup> And Gainas seems to have been chosen for his Arianism rather than his political importance. Nor does Nilus correspond with any of the great churchmen of the early fifth-century East; merely a host of unknown monks, deacons and archimandrites. Here we may contrast the correspondence of Theodoret, so important for the ecclesiastical and even political historian of the age. Nor is Nilus made to

<sup>46</sup> See Gribomont 263.

<sup>47</sup> Gribomont 263–64; this is of course, a particularly delicate task in the case of an author who quotes so extensively from others.

<sup>48</sup> Bacchus the Prefect (2.258); Eusebius the *Dux* (2.261); Severus the ex-Prefect (3.199); Symmachus the General (2.165); Tauranius the ex-Prefect (2.178); Eleutherius, *comes Orientis* (2.288). The following are styled just *illustris*, in my judgement a suspiciously large number for the period (there is not one among the correspondents of the contemporary Isidore of Pelusium); Auxentius (2.39–40); Demarchus (2.244); Elias (2.273); Johannes (2.320); Konon (1.144); Lycurgus (2.147); Philo (1.138); Pionius (3.31); Stratio (1.299); Vivianus (3.91–92). Naturally all these men (and the many lesser figures) will have to be registered in *PLRE II*; it is not likely that all are figments of our editor’s imagination, but some are almost bound to be.

establish his orthodoxy in any conspicuous way. Though a contemporary of the protagonists in the Nestorian controversy, his own christology is pre-Nestorian.<sup>49</sup> It was not till the iconoclast era that letters of Nilus were to play a part in theological controversy. In short, our forger seems to have had no serious purpose.

What then was he up to? Perhaps our forger will turn out to be nothing more sinister than a rather unintelligent late admirer of Nilus whose purpose was merely to produce an edition of the great man's correspondence (it is possible that no collected edition had yet appeared). He may well have worked from Nilus' own papers, no doubt still available in his monastery in Ancyra. Most of the material he used was genuine Nilus; some at least of the extracts from other writers (all earlier than Nilus) were perhaps made by Nilus himself for his own purposes, and mistaken by the editor for letters. It would appear that many letters carried only a bare name for heading. Where there were indications in the letters, he made an intelligent guess at the addressee's rank, state or profession. Where there were none, he simply invented titles, on what principle it would be idle to guess, quite oblivious of anachronism. There may even have been one or two genuine letters to Gainas that suggested putting his name at the top of 1.286 (it is stated in the letter that its addressee was a general, though he is not there named). The repetition and the subdivision of the longer letters were no doubt the work of the editor, though some of the repetition may have been due to Nilus. Whether it was the editor or Nilus who was responsible for the re-use of material from Nilus' other writings must likewise remain uncertain. There is obviously room for further research here, in particular on the relationship between false or dubious titles and non-Nilan content. (Such research might lead to a less charitable interpretation of the editor's rôle.)

A *terminus ante quem* of the sixth century has already been suggested for this editorial activity. The sixth century would, in fact, be a most appropriate moment for such an enterprise. In his own lifetime Nilus seems to have been an obscure figure, nor was he much read in the century that followed his death. None of the great letter writers of the age corresponded with him, and we have already seen how undistinguished (when stripped of its unmerited titles) was Nilus' own

<sup>49</sup> Heussi 115f.

circle—presumably for the most part local. Nor is he mentioned or quoted by a single writer of the fifth century, not even Palladius or Theodoret. The former may have published his *Lausiaca History* too early (419/20), and the latter's *Historia Religiosa* was perhaps too local in scope, but the general silence is surely significant.

It is not till the early sixth century that we find the first mention of Nilus. His biblical commentaries are extensively cited in the biblical *catenae* of Procopius of Gaza (ca 460–ca 526).<sup>50</sup> Then came the curious matter of his acquisition of much of the *oeuvre* of the Origenist Evagrius Ponticus. When Evagrius' writings were declared heretical at the Council of 553, they were kept in circulation by his admirers under the names of other, safe writers, in particular Nilus.<sup>51</sup> Why Nilus was chosen for this rôle we can only guess: perhaps precisely because he was a relatively obscure and uncontroversial figure, whose books were not so well known that the production of a few more would excite suspicion. Yet more apocryphal writings attached themselves to his name in due course, of which the most conspicuously fraudulent is the entirely fictitious pseudo-biographical *Narrationes*, apparently embroidered out of the story about St Plato told in the letter to Heliodorus (4.62).<sup>52</sup> The deliberate misattribution of Evagrius' books to Nilus presumably began soon after 553. Nilus was becoming fashionable. It was perhaps late in the sixth century that an Ancyrene monk decided that there was now a public for the still unpublished correspondence of his distinguished predecessor.

For the student of early fifth-century eastern spirituality, then, my conclusion is relatively reassuring. There is probably less that is straightforwardly spurious than Quasten was prepared to allow. But the prosopographer who has hitherto innocently supposed Nilus' correspondence a treasure-house of early fifth-century officials will certainly have to tread with care. Is 'Nero the ex-consul' a straight-

<sup>50</sup> N. G. Wilson, "A Chapter in the History of Scholia," *CQ* 17 (1967) 252–54.

<sup>51</sup> For the list, Quasten 175, 502f. Robert Browning has recently discovered the complete text of a genuine work presumed lost, a commentary on the *Song of Songs*, apparently written in Nilus' old age: see *REByz* 24 (1966) 107–14. Its authenticity is proved by coincidences with citations from Nilus in Procopius' *catena* on the *Song of Songs*, PG 87, 1545f. As Browning rightly remarked (p.114), once the text is published "il faudra aussi passer au crible la volumineuse correspondance de saint Nil, car beaucoup de ses lettres s'avèrent être en effet des extraits ou des résumés de ses autres oeuvres." Another necessary task before a final verdict on the correspondence becomes possible.

<sup>52</sup> Heussi 151f.

forward fiction, a genuine sixth-century contemporary of the forger, or a genuine contemporary of Nilus decked out with a false title? The answer may vary from case to case.<sup>53</sup>

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