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The Authority of a 'Quasi-Bishop': Patronage and Networks in the Letters of Isidore of Pelusium

1 Introduction

During the first decades of the fifth century, Pelusium was a middle-sized city in the North-Eastern Nile Delta. The city was the provincial capital of Augustamnica Prima and its easy access to the Mediterranean had provided a big harbour with the occasion to develop and flourish. With the metropolis and cultural centre Alexandria, as well as monastic centres in the desert not too far away, it was a place where talented people could start or develop a successful life, whether it be devoted to intellectual pursuits, an ecclesiastical career, the monastic life or a career in business, administration or politics.

In this article, we will focus on one of the best-known sons of this city: Isidore of Pelusium. His corpus of 2000 extant letters is a goldmine of information about late antique patronage and networking. We will first introduce Isidore and highlight some important points about his letters. The lions' share of the article will consist of an overview of the many types of networks and patronage Isidore was involved in, each of which will be made more concrete by examples taken from his letters. We conclude by evaluating what type of leadership Isidore's example bears testimony to and to what extent the term 'quasi-bishop' in the title may encapsulate this.

2 Isidore and his letters

Most of our knowledge about Isidore of Pelusium has to be derived from his extant letters. Isidore was a native from Pelusium and must have been born there ca. 360. After an extensive education in his native city and in Alexandria, he was appointed by the βουλή (city council) as σοφιστής (a tutor for advanced students). During his tenure of this position he came in contact with young people with high potential in Pelusium and with their parents. This was one of the foundations of his wide ever-expanding network: when they climbed the career ladder, Isidore kept in contact with them and they, in turn, asked for his advice and through their contacts helped him enlarge his network. Next, he changed his sec-

ular career for an ecclesiastical one and became a priest in Pelusium, under bishop Ammonius whom he greatly admired and who, in turn, trusted him. For many years Isidore served the church of Pelusium as one of its leading persons. No doubt this has deepened his identification with the city and the church of Pelusium and his determination to contribute to it as much as possible. Yet, everything changed dramatically with the appointment of Ammonius' successor, Eusebius, under whose leadership matters in the church of Pelusium went completely wrong. The situation must have been unpleasant, to say the least, as it made Isidore leave the city. For the last three decades of his life, Isidore lived as a monk in the Nitrian desert, in a monastery not too far from Pelusium. In these years the majority of his letters has been written. He died no later than 449 or 450.¹

The corpus of about 2000 (mostly rather short) letters is Isidore's sole legacy.² These understudied letters document his dealings with bishops, priests, civil administrators, monks, and other inhabitants of Pelusium. Although a monk and living at a distance from his city, he clearly was well-informed about what went on. He entertained a wide network in and around Pelusium as well as in the monastic world of his region. He was held in high esteem and many contacted him

1 This brief biographical sketch relies on the exhaustive discussion in the seminal monograph on Isidore by Pierre Éviéux, *Isidore de Péluse*, ThH 99 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1995), 295–330. See also Johan Leemans, "Die Briefe des Isidor von Pelusium: Bildung, Glaube, Kommunikation," in *Von Rom nach Bagdad: Bildung und Religion in der späteren Antike bis zum Klassischen Islam*, eds. Peter Gemeinhardt and Sebastian Günther (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012): 29–49; Ursula Treu, "Isidor II (von Pelusium)," *RAC* 18 (1998): 982–1002; Lillian Larsen, "The Letter Collection of Isidore of Pelusium," in *Late Antique Letter Collections: A Critical Introduction and Reference Guide*, eds. Cristiana Sogno, Bradley K. Storin and Edward J. Watts (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016): 286–308.

2 The transmission of these letters is complicated. For a brief survey see Treu, "Isidor," 985–987. See also Cuthbert H. Turner, "The Letters of Saint Isidore of Pelusium," *JThS* 6 (1905): 70–86; Kirsopp Lake, "Further Notes on the Mss of Isidore of Pelusium," *JThS* 6 (1905): 270–282; Morton Smith, "Manuscript Tradition of Isidore of Pelusium," *HTHR* 47 (1954): 205–210; Madalina Toca, "The Greek Manuscript Reception of Isidore of Pelusium's Epistolary Corpus," *BN* 175 (2017): 133–143. Until 2017, the letters 1214–1700 have been critically edited by P. Éviéux, *Lettres 1214–1413*, and *Lettres 1414–1700* (in SC 422, and 454). He has changed the numbering adopted in the *Patrologia Graeca* 78, see Pierre Éviéux, "Isidore de Péluse. La numérotation des lettres dans la tradition manuscrite," *Revue de recherches sur l'histoire des textes* 5 (1975): 45–72 and the concordance in Éviéux, *Isidore de Péluse*, 411–418. Recently, letters 1701–2000 have also been published in SC 586 by Nicolas Vinel who prepared for publication the late Éviéux' unfinished edition. In what follows we will consistently follow Éviéux's numbering of the letters, and will refer to SC or PG (including page-numbers or column-numbers) when discussing a letter at length.

for advice or spiritual guidance. He also kept a close look at the affairs of the local church in Pelusium and he did not hesitate to intervene. For many people from his region, he was an unofficially recognised authority. According to a rough estimate, about 50 % of Isidore's letters were written as response to queries from his correspondents in the form of letters,³ and they were often a part of an on-going correspondence. This is reflected in a considerable number of addressees who received more than a few letters from Isidore.⁴

Unfortunately, the exploitation of this goldmine of information is hampered by at least three major factors. First, the letters are often short, and it has been thought that they were truncated by a compiler.⁵ Content wise they are often not concrete, lacking precise historical information and making the identification of various episodes quite difficult. Moreover, much historical context, shared by writer and reader, is assumed and, hence, not explained. So, to continue the example, we can only guess whether there was a concrete reason to send out a friendly reminder, or a severe injunction⁶ to do better (Isidore did not shy away from that either). The isolated character of this documentation makes it also hard to evaluate the historical reliability of what Isidore writes. In most cases we only hear his side of the story. At best, there is circumstantial evidence⁷ that what is described is something one might expect or which is also on record for other regions or periods, but we seldom get further than this.

3 'Mehr als die Hälfte aller Briefe lässt deutlich erkennen dass sie eine Antwort auf eine Anfrage sind' (Treu, "Isidore," 989).

4 See Éviex, *Isidore de Péluse*, 91–241. There are actually quite some correspondents to whom he sends a couple of dozen letters: bishop Apollonius receives fourteen letters, priest Athanasius and *clarissimus* Dorotheus receive eighteen letters each, Ausonius the corrector receives seventeen, the soldier Isaiah receives at least fourteen letters, bishop Eusebius fifteen, deacon Eustathius receives about thirty six (some in common with other people), the sophist Harpocrates twenty eight, the *comes* Herminius forty one, bishop Hermogenes at least twenty four, bishop Isidore about thirty one, bishop Lampetius twenty seven, Paul (a monk or a clerk in Pelusium) receives forty three, Maron and Zosimus receive more than sixty letters, and deacon Eutonium receives seventy six. Thus, there is quite a wide range of variation among the people he is in constant contact with.

5 The most critical voice in this regard was that of Otto Riedinger, "Neue Hypotyposen-Fragmente bei Pseudo-Caesarius und Isidor von Pelusium," *ZNW* 51 (1960): 154–196, esp. 155.

6 For instance, in letter 1324 [5.75] to deacon Diogenes, Isidore blames him for losing his grace, and warns him that if he falls astray once more, he will not have anybody to help him recover. In letters 1478 [5.194] and 1776 [5.405] to deacon Palladius, Isidore exhorts him to abstain from lust, and reminds him that even if he escapes the judgment of people, he will not escape that of God.

7 For instance, for the events around the Council of Ephesus, the episcopal lists may help us spot the bishops from Isidore's entourage, etc.

A second factor that convolutes the examination of this corpus, is the difficulty of identifying the addressees of the letters. They are mentioned in the title of the letter but only by name, and often, but not always, function. As there are in the corpus some addressees with the same name, it is sometimes not even clear which letters have been sent to whom. Thus, it is not uncommon to have letters sent to one and the same person who appears within the corpus with up to four or five functions.

For instance, there are seventeen letters addressed to persons with the name 'Didymus':⁸ six of these letters sent to the 'priest Didymus'⁹ (with the function attached), one letter addressed to 'Didymus and Heron,'¹⁰ seven more to 'Didymus' without any title or function attached,¹¹ and finally there are also three letters to a 'Didymus *scholasticus*.'¹² When we exclude the letters addressed to Didymus *scholasticus* (for which the function attached makes it clear that we are dealing with a different character than the 'priest' Didymus), we are left with fourteen letters possibly addressed to one and the same person. On this basis, it has been rather common in scholarship to assume a connection between Isidore and Didymus the Blind. This is significant for the dating of the corpus: if this Didymus would indeed be proven to be the same person as Didymus the Blind, these letters must have been written before 395 when Didymus died, which would place them among the oldest of the whole corpus. Yet, a close examination of the fourteen letters shows that there are virtually no positive indicators to support the identification of Isidore's Didymus with Didymus the Blind and therefore the dating of the earliest letters based on the identification of Didymus as the addressee has a very weak basis.¹³

To give one more example, a Lampetius (without a function attached to his name) receives four letters, Lampetius the 'deacon' receives eight letters, the 'monk' two letters, and the 'bishop' twenty seven. In this case, it is not excluded that Lampetius the 'deacon' and 'monk' later became bishop of Casion.¹⁴ However, there are also more unclear examples of letters sent to a name with several functions. For instance, (a) person(s) named 'John' receives six letters as 'dea-

⁸ For a useful prosopographical list with all the addresses of Isidore's letters and their function, see Évieux, *Isidore de Péluse*, 387–410.

⁹ Letters 681, 682, 1249 [5.28], 1448 [5.167], 1515 [4.20], 1949 [5.534].

¹⁰ Letter 1818 [5.433].

¹¹ Letters 199, 201, 204, 205, 281, 330, 331.

¹² Letters 1492 [5.206], 1493 [5.207], and 1982 [4.152].

¹³ For further discussion see Madalina Toca, "Isidore of Pelusium's Letters to Didymus the Blind," *StPatr* 96 (2017): 325–332.

¹⁴ Évieux, *Isidore de Péluse*, 73.

con,' two letters as 'hermit,' one letter as 'monk,' four letters as '*scholasticus*,' and finally two as 'soldier.' This small dossier is a telling example of how difficult it is to identify the addressees with certainty.¹⁵

Finally, the brief and abstract character of many of the letters, together with the confusion given by several (seemingly unrelated) letters ascribed to the same addressee, bring up a third major struggle, namely the difficulty of dating the letters. While this problem cannot be solved on the level of each individual letter, the abovementioned hurdles can be partially overcome by the sheer size of the letter corpus, and the extensive knowledge we do have of the Later Roman Empire and Egypt in the fourth and early fifth centuries CE. This helps to contextualise the letters, make sense of them and place them at the end of the fourth and the first decades of the fifth century. Much effort has been put into the contextualisation of the material in the pioneering work of some scholars, most notably Pierre Éviex. Standing on the shoulders of his work, we are now able to offer in what follows a non-exhaustive bird's eye view of the breadth and variety of Isidore's activity as a patron and highlight with illustrations the role his network played therein.

3 Isidore's Patronage and Networks

3.1 Bonus, the ship-owner

Patronage and networks were especially valuable when in trouble. Then, an appeal to a high magistrate responsible for the issue under concern was crucial. This could occur directly or through an intermediary who put his network at the service of the person in trouble. Isidore clearly was willing to act as such an intermediary for individuals who approached him for help. The two letters related to the case of the ναύκληρος ('ship-owner') Bonus are a beautiful illustration. What had happened? Egypt was a major production centre for grain. Every year, many ships loaded to full capacity with grain left the harbours of Alexandria for Constantinople. This σιτοπομπία ('transport of corn') was an essential lifeline for the capital and, hence, a sensitive political issue. In 335 the probably slanderous accusation that Athanasius of Alexandria had the plan to prevent the grain fleet from sailing cost him the goodwill of Emperor Constantine. As it was

¹⁵ According to Éviex, *Isidore de Péluse*, 74, it may be the case that John the 'hermit' and John the 'deacon' are one and the same person, and are both subsequently identified as the bishop of Hephaestus or bishop of Panephris. However, this is quite difficult to prove.

so important, quite a few magistrates and a complete army of lower administrative personnel were involved in the practical organisation of this whole endeavour.

Bonus was a ναύκληρος who put his ship at disposal for this σιτοπομπία. Because of the bad weather, heavy winds and a storm on the Mediterranean, his boat with all the grain on board had sunk. This was a major financial loss for Bonus as he had to repay the value of the lost grain to the public treasury. Besides the financial burden on himself and his company, Bonus may also have feared repercussions from the government that put the future of his business in jeopardy. In this dire situation, Bonus asked Isidore for help. Isidore honoured Bonus' request and wrote two letters on his behalf: 299 and 300. The first letter was addressed to a certain Isidore, who is styled ἑπαρχος ('prefect'). This may indicate several very high functions.¹⁶ Given that Bonus was clearly dependent on him and that he was in a position to help him in this regard, we may see with Évieux¹⁷ this Isidore as the *praefectus augustalis* in Alexandria, who had the final responsibility for the ἄνωννα ('grain supply') and ultimately for 'the collection and shipment of the grain.'

In letter 299 Isidore asks his namesake, the ἑπαρχος, to acquit Bonus of having to pay back to the treasure the grain that went lost. After all, it was the bad weather and Bonus could not have done anything to prevent what had happened. This Isidore must have been a Christian because our Isidore casts his argument also in a theological vein: in situations on which we depend on God, we ask for his forgiveness when we have done something wrong. In a similar vein, Isidore should not let justice and the law prevail, but clemency.

Letter 300 has as its addressee Sozomenus, the δομέστικός ('assistant') of the ἑπαρχος. This letter served as a sort of introduction letter, delivered by Bonus himself to Sozomenus. Isidore informs him in one short sentence about Bonus' problems, about which he will already have heard from the prefect. Here too, explicit religious language is being used: Isidore points out that

¹⁶ Terminologically it is also possible that the ἑπαρχος Isidore was *praefectus urbis* or *praefectus praetorio Orientis*, which would make him one of the highest officers in the central political structure of the Empire. We know of an Isidore who occupied such high-ranking positions and we know our Isidore had contact with this Isidore. It is probably the same person but given that Isidore can arrange a personal meeting between Bonus and this ἑπαρχος Isidore, it seems more likely that this took place when he was still holding a position in Egypt rather than in Constantinople. It is also more conceivable that the *praefectus augustalis* would be approached – to whose core-business this belonged – than the very powerful *praefectus urbis* or *praefectus praetorio* who had much more wide-ranging responsibilities, cf. Évieux, *Isidore de Péluse*, 101–102.

¹⁷ Évieux, *Isidore de Péluse*, 102–103.

Bonus adheres to the ‘orthodox religion’ and that he is well-disposed in all regards towards Sozomenus. He requests Sozomenus to liberate Bonus from his miserable situation ‘so that at the great day Christ may crown you with crowns of incorruptibility.’ We do not know what the final outcome of Isidore’s intervention was, but these letters are certainly a telling example of how Isidore put his contacts at work in favour of a fellow-Pelusian.

3.2 Complaints with the highest officials: The Gigantius-affair

But Isidore’s contacts reached even much further into the highest circles of power. The issues he got involved with also went far beyond intervening on behalf of solving the plight of an individual Pelusian ναύκληρος. Isidore also acted as the spokesperson for the community of Pelusium, addressing very high placed magistrates with the request to rectify unjust situations with regard to the city. The Gigantius-affair is an interesting illustration of Isidore’s commitment, well-documented in a dossier of 11 letters.¹⁸ Gigantius, of Cappadocian origin, was making his way through the *cursus honorum* and had occupied an important ὄρχή (‘function’) in Pelusium. The testimony of the letters makes it clear that he was in a leading position in which he had much power over the inhabitants of Pelusium. He may well have been κορρήκτωρ (‘provincial governor’) of Augustamnica Prima and have resided in Pelusium, the capital of the province.

The letters describe in retrospect Gigantius’ many wrongdoings and abuse of power in the past: fake accusations against landowners for not paying taxes; demanding more taxes; pressuring the small landowners into working as hired people on the large estates; confiscating the church funds that were collected to help the poor; false oaths; slander; theft and many more. The Pelusians, according to the exchange between his informants and Isidore, indeed suffered when Gigantius was governing them. But – still according to Isidore – Gigantius had crossed the line of what was deemed acceptable. He was put into chains, put on a boat to the court in Constantinople where he was taken into custody, tried, found guilty and robbed of his position.¹⁹

It is not clear how much of this is historical and how much were things wished for and hoped for at Pelusium. Nor is it sure how precise Isidore was informed

¹⁸ Letters 281, 351, 352, 430, 483–487, 489–490. We follow the analysis of Évieux, *Isidore de Péluse*, 48–56.

¹⁹ Letter 490.

about what happened exactly with Gigantius at the court in Constantinople. Even if his fate had been severe, the consequences were only temporary for the story takes an unexpected turn much later. We do not know when exactly this happened, how much later ‘much later’ exactly was, because Isidore is only using markers of relative chronology to situate Gigantius’ tenure of his function in Pelusium: ‘in the past,’ ‘at that time,’ ‘much earlier.’ The unexpected turn is that, ‘much later,’ Gigantius is trying to be re-established in his position in Pelusium. When this rumour reaches Pelusium, Isidore (in his monastery) and his fellow-Pelusians are self-evidently upset at the idea that the terror of the past would come back. In this situation Isidore puts his network at the service of the city and the province in an attempt to prevent Gigantius’ return.

He also writes to several very high-placed persons at the court in Constantinople with whom he was well-connected. Because the *tituli* of the letters only mention the addressees’ names and not their function(s), it is hard to identify them with absolute certainty. The most conspicuous addressees²⁰ seem to be Rufinus, the *praefectus praetorio Orientis* (letters 178 and 489)²¹ and Florentius, the *praefectus Urbis* (letter 486). For instance, in letter 178 Isidore reproaches Rufinus for having ignored the wrongdoings of the governor Cyrenius, and pleads him to take action or otherwise the Pelusians will be troubled.²²

Three more letters (281 to Didymus, and 351 and 352 to Ammon) were addressed to other connections who were slightly lower in the hierarchy. In all these letters Isidore convincingly argues with reference to the atrocities of the past, that his addressees would use all their influence with the Emperor and within the highest-ranking political circles to avoid the return of Gigantius to Pelusium. Here one sees how far Isidore is willing to go to defend the interest of his compatriots. Even while in the monastery, he remains well-informed and in touch with what happened in the world and to his city and takes an active role in safeguarding the interests of the city and of the province.

²⁰ Isidore seems to contact quite some people in Constantinople about this episode: Seleucus (letter 484), Isidore (letter 485), Archonius (letter 487), Rufinus (letter 489), Catillianus (letter 490). See Éviex, *Isidore de Péluse*, 52.

²¹ See Éviex, *Isidore de Péluse*, 59.

²² This is not a singular case, as he also uses the very same discourse in letter 1328 [5.79] (SC 422, p. 370) to Cyril of Alexandria urging him to properly use his power and remove the οἰκονόμος (‘administrator’) Martinianus from his function. See section 3.4 below.

3.3 Letters to the emperor

When it comes to high-ranking addressees of Isidore, the crown-jewels in the correspondence are the letters he wrote to emperor Theodosius II himself. There are two items in the corpus whose *tituli* present them as letters addressed to this emperor. One is a petition about alleviating the taxes, the other a plea for the emperor's personal involvement in the council of Ephesus. In letter 35 Isidore demands a balanced exercise of power and the reduction of taxes (for the Pelusians, one presumes), as it should be expected from a noble leader who desires to attain the Kingdom of Christ.²³ He clearly uses religious language to give power to his argument, and perhaps to effectively impress Theodosius. As such, Isidore correlates the emperor's salvation with good and honest administration skills; he also pleads for mixing mildness with authority and for the fair distribution of wealth, while hinting at the danger of idolatry when one is inclined to keep too much for himself.

The request of letter 311 is of a different nature altogether. This letter is taken as one of the historical landmarks of the corpus as it directly refers to events around the council of Ephesus from 431. In it, Isidore asks for the emperor's presence no less ("If you would have the chance to be present at the deliberations in Ephesus")²⁴ and for his involvement in overseeing the council of Ephesus, as a strategic way to keep things from going astray. The implication here is that unless Theodosius supervises the voting and remedies the situation, the council is compromised. It is interesting that this letter has been understood to mean that Isidore was aiming to keep the emperor away from the council rather than in-

23 Letter 35 (PG 78, col. 204). On this letter see also G. Merianos and G. Gotsis, "Fifth-Century Patristic Conceptions of Savings and Capital: Isidore of Pelusium and Theodoret of Cyrhus," in their *Managing Financial Resources in Late Antiquity* (London: Palgrave, 2017), at 121–122.

24 Letter 311 (PG 78, col. 361): Θεοδοσίω Βασιλεῖ. Εἰ μὲν αὐτὸς λαμβάνη καιροῦ παρῆναι τοῖς κρινομένοις ἐν Ἐφέσῳ, προσέσται τούτοις εὖ οἶδα τὸ ἄμεμπτον. Εἰ δὲ ὀχλώδῃ ἀντιπαθεῖα τὰς ψήφους ἐκδώσειας, τίς ἐξαίρησεται τὴν σύνοδον σκωμμάτων: Παρέξεις δὲ τούτοις θεραπείαν, εἰ παύσειας τῶν δογματισμῶν τοὺς σοὺς διακόνους, πρὸς μέγα χάσμα διεστῶτας, βασιλεῖ ὑπηρετεῖσθαι καὶ Θεῷ διαφιλονεικεῖσθαι ἢ μή πως τῷ κράτει σάλον ἐπενέγκωσι, τῇ πέτρᾳ τῆς Ἐκκλησίας προσρηγνύντες τὰ τῆς κακοπιστίας αὐτῶν μηχανήματα. Αὕτη γὰρ ἐρήρεται, καὶ οὔτε ὑπὸ πυλῶν ᾄδου κυριεύεται, ὡς ὁ δράσας αὐτὴν Θεὸς ἐπηγγείλατο. "If you would have the chance to be present at the deliberations in Ephesus, I know that there will be no reproach for you on their part. But if you give up the elections to the turbulent anthypaty, who will set the synod free from the follies? You will do them a service, if you stop your servants from dogmatizing, [your servants] who are divided by a great hesitation whether to serve the emperor or contend against God; so that not to bring distemper to the sovereignty, dashing against the rock of the church the contrivances of their wrong belief. For this one stands firm and is not dominated by the gates of hell, as God, its doer, promised when He created it."

volve him in it.²⁵ However, according to Isidore, the emperor's presence as a guarantor of peace presents two advantages: on the one hand, his subordinates would not erroneously dogmatise, being torn between 'serving the emperor' and 'quarreling with God,' and on the other, the antipathies of the rival ecclesiastical parties (i.e. Cyril and Nestorius) would not escalate. One should differentiate here between the intervention of the emperor and that of his subordinates. Isidore only tries to prevent the latter, which is why he asks for the presence of the emperor at the council, to oversee the peace.²⁶ In any case, what we know from the conciliar proceedings is that Theodosius did not come in person, but entrusted his representative Candidianus with the practicalities,²⁷ who was later dismissed for possibly favouring Cyril's followers.²⁸

3.4 Letters to Cyril of Alexandria

Picking up from here, and standing in close relation with the Ephesus-event, Isidore's most high-ranking addressee from the ecclesiastical milieu is Cyril of Alexandria. Cyril is the recipient of no less than eleven letters, eight of which are addressed to 'bishop Cyril (of Alexandria)' – 310, 323, 324, 370, 627 [2.127], 1106 [3.306], 1328 [5.79], 1582 [5.268], and the remaining three to 'Cyril' without any title attached – 25, 393, 497.

The correspondence with Cyril develops along two main coordinates: one has to do with a local conflict, covering a number of complaints around the wrongdoings of the bishop of Pelusium, and the other, with a wider scope, is re-

²⁵ See, for instance, Larsen, "The Letter Collection of Isidore of Pelusium," 301, footnote 26: "Ep. 311 ... critiques Theodosius II for imperial interference in conciliar proceedings."

²⁶ Although not completely clear, Évieux distinguishes between the involvement of the emperor's subordinates and the emperor's own intervention: "... le Pélusiote demande à l'empereur de ne pas laisser ses subordonnés se mêler des affaires de l'Église à Éphèse. La tentation était grande, on le sait, pour l'empereur, si féru de théologie et si désireux de placer l'Église d'Orient sous le pouvoir impérial, de diriger selon son gré les sessions du concile afin d'éviter les affrontements entre les factions rivales" (Évieux, *Isidore de Péluse*, 47).

²⁷ Norman Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, The Early Church Fathers (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), 46, 48–50; Susan Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy*, OECs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 143, 167–169.

²⁸ Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 51. The documents exchanged between the parties (letters to and from Cyril, the reports of Nestorius, Candidianus, and John of Antioch) are preserved in the Proceedings of the Council in *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* (ACO), *tomus primus, volumus primus, pars prima – pars septima Concilium Universale Ephesinum*, ed. Eduard Schwartz (Berlin, Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter 1927–9).

lated to the council of Ephesus. Here we will mainly focus on the latter, as it sheds light on Isidore's ambitions on a larger scale than a home-grown quarrel. However, for the sake of comparison, it is useful to briefly present first the Pelusium affair as well.

The conflict erupts with the newly elected bishop Eusebius, accused by Isidore of having sold ordinations to unworthy candidates,²⁹ and having overlooked the abuses of the clerics,³⁰ among whom the priest Zosimus, and the οἰκονόμος ('administrator') Martinianus. Zosimus is central in this conflict, receiving the greatest number of letters from Isidore (eighty one!),³¹ and together with Martinianus, they are depicted as two of the most detested people in Pelusium. Taking into account the large number of letters touching upon this conflict (at least two hundred letters) it is interesting to see how Isidore provides more often *ad hominem* attacks, and literary motifs (they are former slaves,³² uneducated, vicious – letters 1035, 1048, 1902 [5.496] – and do not know the Scriptures), rather than concrete accusations (they misuse the church funds – letter 613, do not give alms – letters 544, 627).

It is in this conflict that Isidore draws Cyril by demanding him to step in and stop the abuses. To give one example, in letter 1328 [5.79]³³ – adopting an extremely venomous tone – Isidore describes the greediness of the οἰκονόμοι,³⁴ who are only preoccupied with their own prosperity and are not distributing the funds fairly. Isidore also implies that unless Cyril takes responsibility for the church wealth's distribution, the poor will be continuously oppressed. Thus, it is interesting to see how Cyril is both suspected of having tacitly toler-

²⁹ See for instance letters 26, 30, 119, 151, 215, 250, 341.

³⁰ See letters 28, 119, 250, etc.

³¹ If one also counts the letters which are not only addressed to Zosimus and the letters which refer to him, without necessarily being addressed to him, there are no less than 178 letters related to this name, which – out of the 2000 letters – is quite an impressive number. See Évieux, *Isidore de Péluse*, 213.

³² It is interesting to see how they are both depicted as 'freed slaves,' or 'sons of slaves' (letters 890, 1822 [5.437], 1290 [5.59]), of uncertain origin (letter 627), a leitmotif for the unworthiness of a person for a higher position.

³³ SC 422, p. 370.

³⁴ The function of the οἰκονόμος was regulated only about the mid of the fifth century. They were mainly responsible with the financial aspects of the church, and were "ranked among a lesser and parallel group of clergy," as the financial and the liturgical aspects were quite separated, see Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity. Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins, 1997), 225. Ewa Wipszycka, *The Alexandrian Church: People and Institutions*, JJP.S 25 (Warsaw: The Raphael Taubenschlag Foundation, 2015), 256–7. Also ead., *Les ressources et les activités économiques des églises en Egypte du IVe – VIIIe siècle*, PapyBrux 10 (Brussels: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1972), 135–141.

ated the abuses of Eusebius and Martinianus, but is also considered the only one capable to end these wrongdoings. In any event, it is noteworthy how Isidore takes a stance against this unfortunate situation, and how he depicts himself as reacting to it through his letters. By the number of people involved, the claimed gravity of matters at stake, and the urgency of having things solved, Isidore manages to build up for himself the image of a passionate defender of the community and church in Pelusium, and of an old wise advisor of Cyril himself.

The second set of letters addressed to Cyril is related to the council of Ephesus, which reveals Isidore as playing on a different level. He surpasses the role of a local protagonist and gives amplitude to his image as a church figure engaged in greater ecclesiastical matters. To start with, in letter 310, Cyril is urged not to imitate the directions of his uncle (Theophilus of Alexandria),³⁵ but to show impartiality in his actions with regard to the Ephesus council. In doing so, he is rebuking two bishops of Alexandria at once. The letter preserves a strong criticism of Cyril, allegedly echoing not only Isidore's disappointment, but also the opinion of those gathered at Ephesus:

Sympathy is not clear-sighted, and antipathy does not see at all. If you wish therefore to be clear of both eye-sores, do not come out with violent denials, and leave the accusations to a fair judgment. ... For many of those who have gathered at Ephesus are ridiculing you, that you are guarding your own enmity but you are not searching for the right belief of Jesus Christ. "He is the nephew of Theophilus," they say "and is imitating his judgment. For just as that one spread his clear mania upon the God-bearing and God-loved John, so this one longs to boast himself, though there is a great difference between those who are accused."³⁶

The background of this letter should be understood in relation with Theophilus' attitude towards John Chrysostom whom Theophilus deposed in 403,³⁷ but also as referring to Cyril's rivalry towards Nestorius. Thus, comparing Cyril with Theophilus is meant to reveal an existing pattern which seems to be occurring again.

³⁵ On the relationship between Cyril and his uncle in the aftermath of the latter's dispute with John Chrysostom see Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 23–27, and 31–32.

³⁶ Letter 310 (PG 78, col. 361): Προσπάθεια μὲν οὐκ ὀξυδορκεῖ, ἀντιπάθεια δὲ ὅλως οὐχ ὀρᾷ. Εἰ τοίνυν ἑκατέρας λήμης βούλει καθαρεῦσαι, μὴ βιαίαις ἀποφάσεις ἐκβίβαζε, ἀλλὰ κρίσει δικαίᾳ τὰς αἰτίας ἐπίτρεψον. ... Πολλοὶ γάρ σε κωμωδοῦσι τῶν συνειλεγμένων εἰς Ἔφεσον, ὡς οἰκεῖαν ἀμυνόμενον ἔχθραν, ἀλλ' οὐ τὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ὀρθοδόξως ζητοῦντα. Ἀδελφιδοὺς ἐστί, φασι, Θεοφίλου, μιμούμενος ἐκείνου τὴν γνώμην. Ὅσπερ γὰρ ἐκεῖνος μανίαν σαφῆ κατεσκέδασε τοῦ θεοφόρου καὶ Θεοφιλοῦς Ἰωάννου, οὕτως ἐπιθυμεῖ καυχῆσθαι καὶ οὗτος, εἰ καὶ πολὺ τῶν κρινομένων ἐστὶ τὸ διάφορον.

³⁷ Énieux, *Isidore de Péluse*, 82; Norman Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria* (London: Routledge, 2007), 31–34.

Though not specifically mentioned, Isidore probably also has in mind the fact that, at first, Cyril refused the rehabilitation of John Chrysostom.³⁸

Taken together, letter 310 to Cyril and letter 311 to the emperor show Isidore rebuking the highest ecclesiastical authority and seeking to determine the involvement and, to some extent, the course of action, of an emperor in a church council. The rationale for his plan to involve the emperor, however, is explained in a different letter addressed to Cyril: in letter 1582 [5.268] Isidore complains that the priestly office was once strong enough to correct the flaws of the empire, but now it is under it. Distinguishing those who pretend to be priests (those who insult the priesthood through their wrong deeds) from true priesthood, Isidore notes that under the current circumstances it is reasonable that the imperial office corrects those who do not manage the church as they should. The rule of the emperor is therefore seen as absolutely necessary given the current state of the church, and Isidore writes letters to both leaders of his world to argue for the course of events which is most in accord with his view.³⁹

Within this framework, letter 370 is particularly interesting for the way in which Isidore envisages his relationship to Cyril. In the same vein as in letter 310, Isidore does not hesitate to make demands from Cyril. Yet he does so through an interesting interplay of the ‘father’ – ‘son’ vocabulary: first, he adopts the tone of an older spiritual father who has to write to his son.⁴⁰ Then, modestly taking the persona of a son, he actually speaks as if impersonating the whole Egyptian Church, dependent upon Cyril’s decisions.

The examples of the holy Scripture frighten me, and I am compelled to write you that which is necessary. For if I am a father – as you are saying yourself – I fear the condemnation of Eli because he did not correct his sons who were erring. Or if I would happen to be your son, as I rather know [that I am], of you who are put in the posture of the great Mark, I am in distress about the penalties of Jonathan, which did not prevent his father for seeking the sorcerer. ... Therefore, in order for me not to be condemned, and for you not to be judged by God, bring the quarrels to an end. [...]⁴¹

38 See letter 75 of Atticus of Constantinople to Cyril concerning the reinstatement of John Chrysostom, and the unenthusiastic response of Cyril in letter 76. See John I. McEnerney, trans. *St. Cyril of Alexandria, Letters 51–110*, FaCh 77 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 83–85 and 86–91. Also Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 206, n. 24.

39 The same *topos* appears in letter 1346 [5.89] to Eusebius the priest in which Isidore underlines that “the piety of the rulers puts into light the impiety of the bishops” (SC 422, p. 394).

40 See Larsen, “The Letter Collection of Isidore of Pelusium,” 290.

41 Letter 370 (PG 78, col. 392): Φοβεῖ με τὰ τῆς θείας Γραφῆς ὑποδείγματα, καὶ γράφειν τὰ χρεῶν ἀναγκάζομαι. Εἴτε γὰρ πατὴρ εἰμι, ὡς ἔφης αὐτὸς, δέδια τοῦ Ἥλעי τὴν κατάκρισιν, ὅτι τοὺς υἱοὺς ἁμαρτόντας οὐκ ἔσωφρόνισεν · εἴτε υἱὸς σου τυγχάνω, ὡς μᾶλλον ἐπίσταμαι, τὸν μέγαν ἐκείνον σχηματίζοντος Μάρκον, ἀγωνιῶ τοῦ Ἰωάνθαν τὸ ἐπιτίμιον, ὅτι τὸν πατέρα ζητή-

Unfortunately, the letter remains obscure as to what the quarrels were actually about. While this might allude to Cyril's confrontations with Nestorius, with the Antiochenes, and so on, Évieux' suggestion that this letter refers to events that happened during the council of Ephesus, thus around June, or July 431, is not impossible.⁴² In any event, this gives us a glimpse into the way Isidore envisages his interactions with Cyril, possibly around the Ephesus event.

Letter 324⁴³ then may hint to the aftermath of the council. There Isidore exhorts Cyril to persist in his teachings, without contradicting himself. For, when one is to compare his older with his newer writings, one shall not consider the changes and inconsistencies due to looseness, or vain glory. Given Isidore's aggravate tone, the letter was probably written immediately before the Formula of Union in 433, when the outcome was not yet clear.⁴⁴

Finally, letter 323 is interesting because it contains Isidore's theological stance within the Christological debates of the day. He affirms that "the true God, over all things, became truly man neither having changed what he was or having taken what he was not, the only Son being from the beginning, of two natures (ἐκ φύσεων δυοῖν)⁴⁵ without beginning and without end, new and eternal."⁴⁶ Évieux dates it to either the period of the Nestorian quarrels or after the Council of Ephesus, during the quarrels with the Orientals (431–433).

To conclude: these letters show Isidore not only dealing with minor local conflicts and administrative matters, but interacting with, and trying to influence the highest exponents of power available – the bishop of Alexandria and the emperor, possibly even aiming at playing out one against the other.

σαντα ἐγγαστρίμυθον οὐκ ἐκώλυσε. ... Ἵνα τοίνυν κἀγὼ μὴ κατακριθῶ, καὶ αὐτὸς παρὰ Θεοῦ μὴ κριθῆς, παῦσον τὰς ἔριδας' [...].

⁴² Évieux, *Isidore de Péluse*, 83.

⁴³ Letter 324 (PG 78, col. 369).

⁴⁴ Évieux, *Isidore de Péluse*, 84.

⁴⁵ According to Andreas Schmid, *Die Christologie Isidors von Pelusium*, Paradosis; Beiträge zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur und Theologie 2 (Freiburg: Paulusverlag, 1948), 107, the ἐκ φύσεων δυοῖν formula is a later interpolation, and it does not seem customary before the synod of Constantinople (448). For a detailed analysis of the Christological *formulae* in letters 23, 303, 323 and 405, see Schmid, *Die Christologie*, 56–63.

⁴⁶ Letter 323 (PG 78, col. 369): Ὅτι δὲ ὁ ἀληθινὸς καὶ ἐπὶ πάντων Θεὸς, ἄνθρωπος γέγονεν ἀληθῶς, οὔτε ὃ ἦν τραπεῖς, καὶ ὃ οὐκ ἦν προσλαβὼν, ἐκ φύσεων δυοῖν ὃ εἰς ὑπάρχων Υἱὸς, ἀναρχος καὶ ἀπέραντος, πρόσφατος καὶ αἰδῖος...

3.5 Letters to monks

So far we have paid attention to Isidore's involvement with the higher echelons of politics and administration. These are interesting case-studies but they should not make us forget that Isidore was first and foremost a monk and a man of the church. A substantial part of his correspondence was addressed to monks and discusses issues that are pertinent to the concerns of that world.⁴⁷ The eleven letters he sent to the monk Strategius⁴⁸ may be seen as a master-example for many other letters to monks. One difference, though: Isidore and Strategius seem to have been friends. Not only does Isidore address him as "my friend" but in letter 1503, he announces a visit:

If God so wills, you may expect to see me very soon in your monastery. For indeed, I will come to see your Piety (τὴν σὴν θεοσέβειαν), before everybody else. [I also come] to embrace the in all respects admirable Theodosius, as he is a friend already for a long time and as we hold him in high esteem."⁴⁹

Apparently, Isidore and Strategius had been in close contact for some time. Strategius must have belonged to another monastery than Isidore. Between the two monasteries connections seem to have existed.

The other letters make clear that it was not really a friendship between two intimate friends but more that between two educated monks with Isidore taking on the role of spiritual guide. He gives Strategius advice about the virtuous life and sends him letters to congratulate him with the progress he is making on the path towards virtue. To Isidore, the virtue for the monk is, unsurprisingly, the mortification of the passions. In this regard, he also entertains a positive anthropology: thanks to the synergy between divine grace and human commitment, humans can achieve virtue. In this vein, in letter 572⁵⁰ Isidore offers some

⁴⁷ The announcement of a visit (letter 1503 [5.216]), praises of virtue (letter 1124), and concerns about battling passions (letter 1027), etc.

⁴⁸ Letters 572, 766, 898, 1025, 1027, 1028, 1124, 1303 [4.129], 1503 [5.216], 1901 [5.495], 1931 [5.519]. For a more extensive discussion of these letters, see Johan Leemans, "From Isidore to Strategius: An Example of Monastic Correspondence in Fifth-Century Egypt," in *Felici Curiositate. Studies in Latin Literature and Textual Criticism from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, in *Honour of Rita Beyers*, eds. Guy Guldentops, Christian Laes and Gert Partoens, IPM 72 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017): 363–377.

⁴⁹ Letter 1503 (SC 454, pp. 170–171): "Ἦδη με, σὺν Θεῷ δὲ εἰρήσθω, προσδόκησον ἐν τῷ μοναστηρίῳ · ἤξω γὰρ τὴν σὴν πρό γε πάντων ὀψόμενος θεοσέβειαν, καὶ τὸν διὰ πάντα θαυμάσιον Θεοδόσιον, διὰ μακροῦ φίλον ὄντα καὶ σφόδρα ἡμῖν τετιμημένον, περι πτυζόμενος.

⁵⁰ Letter 572 (PG 78, col. 513–516).

thoughts about the nature of evil in connection with Jer 13:23, where it is said: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also how could you do good who have been taught to do evil?” The text can be construed to mean that doing good is ultimately beyond human capacity. In Isidore’s hands, however, the verse means exactly the opposite. Jer 13:23 says that, “you have been *taught* (μεμαθηκότες) evil.” From this follows that evil does not belong to the nature or essence of the human being but that it is something that can be learned and, hence, also un-learned.

4 Conclusion: A Quasi-bishop?

Isidore assumed all kinds of pastoral and patronage duties, intervened for his city and church, tried to use his influence and put at work his best relations, supported specific causes in which he acted as benefactor (for instance the case of Bonus), but also intervened in mainstream clerical disputes. In all these cases, he can be rightly styled as a well-versed epistolographer, with the skills of a leading authority who projects himself as a leader watching over the flock. These examples, though rather different in nature, serve well to portray Isidore’s decisional aspirations and the rhetorical devices he put at work to win his fights, and to depict himself the way he does. In this sense, while being a monk, he took on quite a few roles that were also adopted by bishops and he apparently did so with the same skills and success as many of his episcopal peers. Much of his successful attempts at networking must be ascribed to the network he built up in Pelusium during the years he was pursuing a secular career. When his pupils went on to higher offices they provided him ready access to a level of decision making inaccessible to the average Egyptian bishop. In this sense, Isidore was probably more influential than many local bishops were. But it would also be misleading to style him a quasi-bishop because he did not do some essential things a bishop should; *audientia episcopalis* and preaching are two obvious examples. But in a collective volume of studies on patronage and networks he is certainly not out of place. At least, he may serve us as a salutary reminder that also non-bishops with a substantial network could try to and succeeded in wielding power.

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