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XXI.—The Pagan Virtue of *Megalopsychia* in Byzantine Syria

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A study of the concept of *megalopsychia* as found in two Byzantine mosaics of Antioch-on-the-Orontes. It is suggested that *megalopsychia* came to be accepted as the principal pagan virtue, with a position somewhat corresponding to that of Charity in the Pauline Triad. The concept was one which could readily be accepted by the Christian emperors as an official imperial "virtue" so long as they were still invested with the classical attributes of imperial authority. Such an attribute was necessary in the political structure, and it could not have been supplied by purely Christian doctrine.

It has been said that ideas are the most durable and long-lived things in the world, and the history of mankind in recent years has shown that the durability of certain ideas can be matched — or sometimes, fortunately, only approached — by the fury with which their enemies seek to overthrow them. The recent years have taught us, too, that ideas persist and even grow, even though, either through stress or in the peaceful evolution of man, they change their clothing and transmute their imagery. Thus it is that to the observer there may seem to have been a veritable transformation, when in truth it is only the outward shell which has changed or has taken on new tones and colors from the changing world in which the original idea continues to live.

Another lesson that has been borne in upon us is that when two systems clash, the triumphant system, sometimes wittingly, sometimes unwittingly, comes to incorporate within itself certain essential elements of the creed or wisdom or way of life which it has conquered. The vanquished state or system does not perish at once, and its ideas, whether by policy of the victor or without his knowledge or even against his will, may emerge, in new dress it is true, in the now complacent and satisfied mind of the conqueror, reassured and relieved in his success.

Thus it is with the triumph of Christianity. A distinguished scholar has written¹ that "between A.D. 320 and A.D. 420 the whole outlook of the civilized world had to change. The greatest revision of historical perspective ever known was forced upon every

¹ C. Oman, *On the Writing of History* (London, 1939) 107.

man. There was never such a complete alteration of moral and political values in such a short time, before or after." In some respects the age in which we are now living is not dissimilar.

The alteration of moral and political values was plain to everyone. Men had to adjust their minds to the new idea that the Roman Emperor, who had been regarded for official purposes as a divine being, had to continue as such, in order to hold together the body of law and custom which constituted the very basis of the Empire's existence, while at the same time he became the actual head of the new State Church whose fundamental teaching and purpose were at variance with the religious and philosophical system on which the imperial power and functions had for centuries been based.²

There was official reaction of a violent kind in the effort of Julian the Apostate to regenerate and reorganize Hellenism. Julian's program could not have been undertaken unless there were considerable support for it. Within Hellenism itself there was the effort, represented in the work of Plotinus, to adjust the ancient philosophy to new conditions. Much similar effort has gone unrecorded. The individual shades of private cogitation and the working out of personal attitudes have left traces which have been pieced together from various bits of evidence until the picture is becoming sufficiently clear.³

A notable addition to our knowledge in this respect has been made by the discovery of certain mosaic floors of religious and philosophical content found in the excavations of Antioch-on-the-Orontes.⁴ The present study will be concerned with the line of thought which is suggested by two of these.

² For a comprehensive study, see C. N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Oxford, 1940). A masterly summary of the process has lately been written by H. Mattingly, "The Later Paganism," *HThR* 35 (1942) 171-179.

³ See J. Geffcken, *Der Ausgang des griech.-roem. Heidentums*, ed. 2 (Heidelberg, 1929); C. Bonner, "Some Phases of Religious Feeling in Later Paganism," *HThR* 30 (1937) 119-140; A. D. Nock, "Orphism or Popular Philosophy?" *HThR* 33 (1940) 301-315; G. Downey, "Personifications of Abstract Ideas in the Antioch Mosaics," *TAPhA* 69 (1938) 349-363 and "Ethical Themes in the Antioch Mosaics," *Church History* 10 (1941) 367-376. The reader should consult the chapters on "The Church and Pagan Culture" in E. K. Rand, *Founders of the Middle Ages*, ed. 2 (Cambridge, Mass., 1941) 3-68, which, while concerned primarily with the Western Roman Empire, give a clear outline of the problem and the solution reached by the Latin Fathers; see also H. Bloch, "A New Document of the Last Pagan Revival in the West," *HThR* 38 (1945) 199-241.

⁴ Published in *Antioch-on-the-Orontes*, 1-3 (Princeton, 1934-1941). Cf. C. R. Morey, *The Mosaics of Antioch* (New York, 1938) and *Early Christian Art* (Princeton,

The plain man sometimes might be a little at a loss to make up a working combination of the teachings of the Church to which he belonged and the traditions of the classical literature in which he had been educated. He could not very well cleave to the former to the exclusion of the latter. All about him, in art and literature, were the pagan way of life and the pagan philosophy — ornaments perhaps, but still existing. The Emperor was still Augustus, and the pious Justinian was portrayed in the middle of Constantinople, on the top of a pillar in the Augustaeum, for all to see, as Achilles.⁵ The Church, realizing that some of these ideas had to be tolerated and that it might be well to absorb some of them, took care to study them, but the theological problems were sometimes difficult and the process long, and the results sometimes would not penetrate easily or clearly either to the plain man or to the upper circles of the aristocracy who, it may be supposed, were, by their way of life, somewhat remote from the more eager faith of the many.

A typical example of the problems which thus came into existence is presented by the catalogues of the virtues. How were the four cardinal virtues — Wisdom, Courage, Temperance, Justice — familiar from the time of Plato and Aristotle, to stand in relation to the Pauline Triad set up in the New Testament?⁶ What could be the relation of the other pagan virtues, which had occupied an essential place in ethics and morals since ancient times, to the various virtues and Christian qualities other than the Triad of Paul?

At the same time there still existed in all forms of public life, in the imperial titles of address and on coins and inscriptions, the official "virtues" of the Roman Emperor, the qualities on the basis of which he had been the head of the State in pagan times and with which he must continue to be invested so long as the Empire rested

1942) 31-36, with figs. 21-29. Studies of the pagan religious content of some of the floors have been made by D. Levi, "Mors voluntaria: Mystery Cults on Mosaics from Antioch," *Berytus* 7 (1942) 19-55, and "AION," *Hesp* 13 (1944) 269-314.

⁵ The statue in which Justinian was arrayed as Achilles is described by Procopius, *De aed.* 1.2.5-12; an early fifteenth century drawing of it is reproduced as the frontispiece of the Loeb Classical Library edition of the *De aedificiis*. See G. Downey, "Justinian as Achilles," *TAPhA* 71 (1940) 68-77, and M. P. Charlesworth, "Pietas and Victoria: The Emperor and the Citizen," *JRS* 33 (1943) 1-10.

⁶ Plato, *Rep.* 427E, cf. also 402c, 536A; Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.* 2.7, 1107a ff. See A. B. D. Alexander, s.v. "Seven Virtues," *Hastings' Encycl. of Religion and Ethics* (New York, 1928) 11.430-432.

on its original basis.⁷ "So deeply were the traditional virtues of the ruler implanted in men's consciousness," writes one student,⁸ "that they could be used as forms of address, so that in the fourth century and later *Clementia Tua*, or *Providentia Tua*, or *Pietas Tua*, are common titles." The *philanthropia* of the ruler runs like a theme through all the later Greek literature of the Roman East.

When Christianity propounded its system of life, offering the Pauline Triad of Faith, Hope and Charity as the basis for the Christian character, it was faced with the question of the relationship to these of the familiar four cardinal virtues. In the New Testament, the four cardinal virtues are mentioned along with the Pauline Triad and the various other graces and virtues which are recommended to Christians. There was an early tendency, however, to emphasize the difference between the classical and the Christian ideals and to repudiate the former. This enthusiasm for exclusively Christian doctrine did not last, and with Origen and Ambrose there begins an effort to utilize the pagan virtues and to connect them with Christian ideas. Augustine took the decisive step in Christianizing the pagan virtues and translating them into new terms. The four earlier virtues became aspects of the way in which the love of God is manifested. The transformed classical virtues thus came to occupy a real place in the Christian system.⁹

At times, however, this process may have seemed academic, and the mosaics and wall-paintings found at Antioch and elsewhere suggest that individuals permitted themselves a good bit of choice and latitude in these matters. Virtues, Christian and classical, appear singly or in groups, sometimes coupled with mere abstractions, according to the taste of the artist or his patron.¹⁰ At Saqqara, for example, we find Faith, Hope and Charity accompanied by Patience, Prudence and Fortitude, and by others whose labels are missing.¹¹ The Pauline Triad plus Patience appears in

⁷ The principal virtues were *Victoria*, *Virtus*, *Clementia*, *Iustitia*, *Pietas*, *Providentia*. See M. P. Charlesworth, *op. cit.* (see note 5) and "The Virtues of a Roman Emperor: Propaganda and the Creation of Belief," *Proceed. of the Brit. Academy* 23 (1937) 105-133; H. Mattingly, "The Roman 'Virtues,'" *HThR* 30 (1937) 103-117. On the titles of address, see K. M. Setton, *Christian Attitude towards the Emperor in the Fourth Century* (New York, 1941).

⁸ Charlesworth, *op. cit.* (see note 7) 127.

⁹ See Alexander, *op. cit.* (see note 6), also Rand, *op. cit.* (see note 3) 81-2.

¹⁰ On the representation of personifications and allegories, consult R. Hinks, *Myth and Allegory in Ancient Art* (London, 1939).

¹¹ J. E. Quibell, *Excavations at Saqqara, 1907-1908* (Cairo, 1909), Pl. 9-10.

a chapel (probably of the sixth century) at Bawit.¹² The mixing of virtues and abstractions is found at el-Bakawat (Khargeh), where in a tomb-chapel of the late fourth or early fifth century Justice is coupled with Peace and Prayer.¹³ At Shohba (ancient Philippiopolis) in the Jebel Druze, Justice is accompanied by Philosophy and Fruitfulness (*Eutekneia*).¹⁴ At Antioch, virtues and personifications are coupled with the seasons, so that *Ananeosis* represents Spring, *Euandria* Summer, *Dynamis* Autumn, and *Ktisis* Winter.¹⁵ One of the most varied assortments appears in the tapestry of *Hestia Polyolbos* at Dumbarton Oaks, where *Hestia* is surrounded by *Ploutos*, *Euphrosyne*, *Eulogia*, *Euochia* (Festivity, Abundance), *Arete* and *Prokope* (Progress, Improvement).¹⁶ Evidently the interest in such matters was widespread and varied.

The representations of virtues which have the greatest interest, however, are two mosaics of the late fifth or early sixth centuries at Antioch which portray *megalopsychia*.¹⁷ In one of these, the personification, with the appropriate label, appears in a medallion in the center of the pavement. Surrounding the medallion are six scenes of hunters in combat with wild beasts. In the other floor, now in the Worcester Museum, there is a central male figure, surrounded by more scenes of the chase: here there are seven hunters, four mounted, three on foot, who slay various animals.

The word *megalopsychia* had been used to denote various qualities. Plato¹⁸ applied it to "arrogance," *aphrosyne*. A more

¹² J. Clédat, "Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouit," *Mém. de l'Inst. franç. d'archéol. orient. du Caire* 12 (1904), Pl. 31.

¹³ C. K. Wilkinson, "Early Christian Paintings in the Oasis of Khargeh," *Bull. of the Metropolitan Museum, New York* 23 (1928), sec. 2, 29-36.

¹⁴ M. Dunand, *Syria* 7 (1926), Pl. 67 (cf. 335).

¹⁵ *Antioch* 2 (see note 4), Pl. 62-63; see Doro Levi, "The Allegories of the Months in Classical Art," *Art Bull.* 23 (1941) 251-291.

¹⁶ P. Friedlaender, *Documents of Dying Paganism: Textiles of Late Antiquity in Washington, New York and Leningrad* (Berkeley, 1945) 7.

¹⁷ It is not necessary to recapitulate in detail the studies made of these mosaics by various scholars; the reader may refer to papers by the present writer, "Personifications of Abstract Ideas in the Antioch Mosaics," *TAPhA* 69 (1938) 356-363; "The Pilgrim's Progress of the Byzantine Emperor," *Church History* 9 (1940) 207-217; "Ethical Themes in the Antioch Mosaics," *ibid.* 10 (1941) 367-376, with the literature cited there, and to notes on the mosaic of Yakto by Ch. Picard, *RA*, ser. 6, 18 (1941) 159-163, and *ibid.* ser. 6, 20 (1942-3) 65, note 2. The mosaics are published in *Antioch* 1 (see note 4) 114-128 and *Antioch* 2, Pl. 71-73, catalogue of mosaics, nos. 200-202, also by Morey, *The Mosaics of Antioch* (see note 4), Pl. 20, and *Early Christian Art* (see note 4) 35 with fig. 31. See also A. J. Festugière, "Le symbole du phénix et le mysticisme hermétique," *Mon. Piot* 38 (1941) 147-151.

¹⁸ *Alcib.* 2.150c.

widely-known conception was Aristotle's notion of *megalopsychia*:¹⁹ "that man is *megalopsychos*, 'great-souled,' who deems himself worthy of great things and is in fact worthy of them." Finally, another view was current. According to this notion, which appears in Diogenes Laertius,²⁰ *megalopsychia* was defined by the Stoics as "the knowledge or habit of mind which makes one superior to anything that happens, whether good or bad equally."

The elaborate character of the floors at Antioch suggests that the owners and their friends took considerable interest in the idea of *megalopsychia*, and the presence in both of them of the allegory of the hunt, which was a well-known device employed both to exemplify the strength and courage of a ruler and to symbolize man's personal triumph over passions and temptations,²¹ serves to strengthen our estimation of the didactic and ethical significance which these mosaics possessed. Whether a contemporary read into them the Aristotelian or the Stoic interpretation, he would still find in these magnificent scenes a lesson of high moral significance which would set before him the epitome of all the virtues. Aristotle indeed had written²² that "Greatness of Soul (*megalopsychia*) seems therefore to be as it were a crowning ornament of the virtues: it enhances their greatness, and it cannot exist without them." Even if one did not know this particular passage, the same notion is inherent in the word *megalopsychia* itself.

Some pagans tried hard to re-study and re-evaluate classical philosophy and ethics in current terms, in order to preserve, among changed conditions, the pagan wisdom and experience of life which they found more satisfying and more practical than Christian doctrine. May it not be that, as the Fathers had subsumed the cardinal virtues to the Pauline Triad, popular thought subsumed the pagan virtues to *megalopsychia*? Might it not well be that men who were not satisfied with Charity as the chief of the Pauline Triad when they considered that the Roman Emperor still must possess his traditional virtues, in order — like Achilles — to guide

¹⁹ *Nic. Eth.* 4.3.3, 1123b.

²⁰ 7.93 (see also 7.128). A similar view is found in the *Enneads* of Plotinus, 1.6.6 and 1.4.7. On the history of *megalopsychia*, consult U. Knoche, "Magnitudo animi: Untersuchungen zur Entstehung u. Entwicklung eines roemischen Wertgedankens," *Ph Suppl.* 27.3 (1935), also J. Stroux, "Die stoische Beurteilung Alexanders des Groszen," *Ph* 88 (1933) 233, note 17.

²¹ See G. Downey, "The Pilgrim's Progress of the Byzantine Emperor," *Church History* 9 (1940) 207-217, and the literature cited there.

²² *Nic. Eth.* 4.3.16, 1124a, transl. of H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library.

the Empire in the affairs of every day, had instinctively hit upon *megalopsychia* as the sovereign virtue which would embrace and irradiate all the others?²³ It was the most readily comprehensible and the least sharply defined and limited of all the pagan virtues, and it could, if one wished, include the Pauline Triad and all the other Christian virtues and qualities. Paul had seen the value of putting one virtue first before all others; but for the imperial virtues, and the other qualities discussed by the pagan philosophers there was no canonical order. One needed, then, either a principal virtue, or something which would summarize all of them. To fill this need, *megalopsychia* was the most logical synthesis of all the highest qualities. Thus if an emperor or a private individual wished to set himself up as a universal man, *megalopsychia* would be the convenient and also the intelligible term to use. Many a man, in those times, must have felt that there was a supreme need for something more than Christian humility to save *Romanitas*, and in *megalopsychia*, a virtue like the Christian virtues, not necessarily excluding them but at the same time carrying within itself the strength and wisdom of official tradition, we may well have the most complete and the most satisfying answer to that need.

One of the most useful and most important things about an emperor is that he is a "magnificent man" — the *princeps inter pares* — to whom his subjects can look for example and inspiration. Constantine, Julian, Theodosius and Justinian could all have aspired to *megalopsychia*, and all their subjects, of whatever inner persuasion or outward service, could both understand and strive for the like confidence and strength. Justinian may have striven to practice Faith, Hope and Charity, and his subjects likewise; but he had himself set up as Achilles and his subjects had in their houses mosaics of *megalopsychia*.²⁴

²³ There must have been many who, like Ammianus Marcellinus, paid lip service to Christianity but quite failed to understand it; see Cochrane, *op. cit.* (see note 2) 312.

²⁴ See the present writer's paper cited above, note 21. The epithet *magnanimus* is used as one of the traditional characterizations of the ruler by Corippus, *In laudem Iustini* 1.248. The contemporary interest in *megalopsychia* as one of the sovereign qualities of mind and soul appears in the well-known miniature in the Vienna manuscript of Dioscorides, produced at Constantinople in the early sixth century, in which the princess Anicia Juliana is represented flanked by two female figures, labelled *Megalopsychia* and *Phronesis*; see Morey, *Early Christian Art* (see note 4), 110, with fig. 116; Hinks, *op. cit.* (see note 10) 105, with Pl. 27a; Ch. Picard, *RA*, ser. 6, 18 (1941) 162–163. Procopius (*Wars* 3.3.15), writing of the excellent qualities of Aetius and Boniface, speaks of *megalopsychia* much as if he considered it the epitome of the

One of the chief lessons of this process is that the term itself was supplied by the pagan "opposition." The outward practices of this opposition were stamped out by law — so many times and over so long a period that one wonders indeed just how effective some of the interdictions were. But the opposition had always been a "loyal opposition" in the sense that it had formed a part of the official basis of the emperor's power and position. It may have been defeated outwardly, and persecuted and driven from its temples, but no amount of proscription could have done away with the notion of *megalopsychia*.

virtues (μεγαλοψυχίας . . . καὶ τῆς ἄλλης ἀρετῆς). Julian uses the epithet *megalopsychos* (in the sense of "great-souled" rather than "generous") as one of the most laudatory terms that can be applied to a ruler (*Orat. 2, The Heroic Deeds of the Emperor Constantius; or, On Kingship*, 86c, and *Orat. 3, Panegyric in Honor of Eusebia*, 109b). The epithet is used in the same sense in the *Oration of Constantine* preserved in the works of Eusebius (ch. 11, pp. 166.32, 167.3, ed. Heikel).