



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Date of Eunapius' *Vitae Sophistarum* and the Establishment of the Martyr Cult in Menouthis

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Abstract

The paper is a contribution to a discussion on the dating of Eunapius' *Vitae Sophistarum*. Arguments are put forward that Eunapius' remark on the necrolatry of the monks of Canopus reflects the establishment of a cult of Saints Cyrus and John. Since this event took place when the Church of Alexandria was headed by Cyril, we may consider the beginning of his archbishopric (October 18, 412 CE) as a reliable *terminus post quem* for the publication of this text.

Keywords: Late Antiquity; Late Roman Empire; Eunapius of Sardis; early monasticism; holy relics; Cyrus and John

Eunapius was born between 347 and 349 CE¹ into a noble family from Sardis, the capital of the Roman province of Lydia. In his sixteenth year, the young man travelled to Athens, where he entered the training of the famous sophist Prohaeresius (Eunap. *VS* 485). Four years later, Eunapius returned home to pursue a career as a rhetor (*VS* 493). Thanks to his relative Chrysanthius, the former tutor of Emperor Julian (*VS* 502–5), Eunapius got acquainted with many prominent pagan intellectuals of his age. The rhetor proudly recalled his meetings with Maximus of Ephesus – another mentor of Emperor Julian (*VS* 473) and his friendship with Oribasius of Pergamon, personal physician and confidant of the Apostate (*VS* 499). Apparently, Eunapius spent the rest of his life in Sardis. The exact date of his death is unknown.²

¹ See Goulet (1980); Banchich (1987); Penella (1990) 2–3.

² For a short summary of Eunapius' biography, see *PLRE* 1, 296 (Eunapius 2); Janiszewski, Stebnicka, Szabat (2014) 116–17 (346. Eunapios).

Eunapius was the author of a *Continuation of the History of Dexippus of Athens in 14 Books* (hereinafter *History*) covering the period from the death of Emperor Claudius II (270) to the demise of Augusta Eudoxia (404) (Phot. *Bibl. Cod.* 77), which survives in fragments. He also wrote the still extant *Lives of Philosophers and Sophists* (hereinafter *VS*), a collection of 23 biographies of East Roman intellectuals of the 3rd–4th centuries.

Despite the long and fruitful tradition of studying Eunapius' works, some of the problems generated by their analysis remain unsolved. Among them is the questionable dating of *VS*, which is crucial for defining the lifespan of some of the heroes of Eunapius' narrative, as well as identifying the sources he used when composing his writings. At this point, the once heated debate over this issue has effectively ceased. Most scholars have accepted Banchich's version, according to which Eunapius was writing *VS* at a time when the outcome of the rebellion of Tribigildus³ had not yet been determined (i.e., in late 399 – early 400 CE).⁴ Even Paschoud, who had once argued for a later dating,⁵ was forced to admit that his opponent's version 'looks attractive'.⁶ However, the participants of the dispute neglected one fragment of Eunapius' text which might shed some new light on this problem.

³ On this mutiny of the Gothic commander of some barbarian *alae* stationed in the diocese of Asia, see Liebeschuetz (1990) 100–10; Cameron and Long (1993) 223–32.

⁴ Banchich (1984). Cf. Penella (1990) 9; Rohrbacher (2002) 66; Liebeschuetz (2003) 179–80; Becker (2013) 31; Janiszewski, Stebnicka, Szabat (2014) 117. The basis for this dating was Eunapius' report about some recent 'confusion' (ἐξ τὸν νεώτερον τουτοῖ θόρυβον ἅπαντα συμπεφύραται καὶ ἀναετάρακται, *VS*. 479), after which the proconsulate of Asia lost administrative independence from *praefectus praetorio Orientis*. This mysterious turmoil was traditionally associated with the political crisis that gripped the Eastern Empire in the last years of the 4th century, primarily the uprising of Gainas and Tribigild. As far as I know, Banchich's reconstruction was rejected only by Cameron and Long (1993: 51 n. 175), who failed to see any logical connection between the lowering of the status of the Asian proconsulate and the rebellion of Tribigild. Overall, they noted that the omnipotent courtier Eutropius would barely strengthen the status of *PPO* (his potential rival in the struggle for influence over emperor Arcadius) at the expense of the reassignment of the Asian proconsul to him. For a rebuttal of these arguments, see Banchich (2000).

⁵ Paschoud (1975: 171) had originally assumed that while writing the first part of his *History*, Eunapius used a hypothetical *Historia Adversus Christianos*, published by some anonymous western pagan shortly after the sack of Rome (410 CE). These considerations led Paschoud to the idea that the first part of Eunapius' *History* was not written earlier than 412. Therefore *VS*, which includes a few references to the first books of Eunapius' historical work, could not have been compiled before 413. It should be noted that Paschoud's ideas also faced the criticism of Cameron and Long. According to them, the absence of any mention of Hypatia, one of the most famous philosophers of that time, in *VS* testifies against its dating to the second decade of the 5th century (Cameron and Long [1993: loc. cit.]). However, this remark can hardly serve as an argument against the later dating. Eunapius believed that only the successors of the traditions of Iamblichus were worthy heirs of the Platonic tradition – for example in his narration, he had never mentioned either Alexandrian Neoplatonists of the 4th century or Themistius of Constantinople (reasons for the absence of his biography in *VS* are discussed in Penella (1990) 134ff). In other words, Eunapius described his own 'school genealogy' in which there was no place for philosophers whom the rhetor did not consider the heirs of the tradition to which he belonged. In this regard, the absence of any mention of Hypatia is quite natural – she had nothing to do with the school of Aedesius and was rather skeptical about theurgy. See Dzielska (1995) 90; Watts (2006) 200–2; Watts (2017) 58.

⁶ Paschoud (1989) 86.

In the passages dedicated to the life of the philosopher Antoninus⁷ and his philosophical-religious community situated in the city of Canopus, Eunapius mentioned that the temples of the city and its environs were destroyed by Christians led by the archbishop Theophilus of Alexandria.⁸ The historian concluded this story with the remark that after the destruction of the ancient cults of Canopus, its vandalised sanctuaries were populated by monks, who venerated the corpses of some criminals, in other words, the relics of Christian martyrs:

τοὺς δὲ μοναχοὺς τούτους καὶ εἰς τὸν Κάνωβον καθίδρυσαν, ἀντὶ τῶν νοητῶν θεῶν εἰς ἀνδραπόδων θεραπείας, καὶ οὐδὲ χρηστῶν, καταδήσαντες τὸ ἀνθρώπινον. ὅστέα γὰρ καὶ κεφαλὰς τῶν ἐπὶ πολλοῖς ἀμαρτήμασιν ἐαλωκότων συναλίζοντες, οὐς τὸ πολιτικὸν ἐκόλαζε δικαστήριον, θεοὺς τε ἀπεδείκνυσαν, καὶ προσεκαλινδοῦντο τοῖς ὅστοις καὶ κρείττους ὑπελάμβανον εἶναι μολυνόμενοι πρὸς τοῖς τάφοις. μάρτυρες γοῦν ἐκαλοῦντο...

Eunap. VS. 472

They settled these monks at Canopus also, and thus they fettered the human race to the worship of slaves, and those not even honest slaves, instead of the true gods. For they collected the bones and skulls of criminals who had been put to death for numerous crimes, men whom the law courts of the city had condemned to punishment, made them out to be gods, haunted their sepulchers, and thought that they became better by defiling themselves at their graves. “Martyrs” the dead men were called...⁹

When speaking of the Christian anchorites who settled in Canopus, Eunapius had in mind the inhabitants of the famous monastery of Metanoia. It was founded shortly after the destruction of local temples and soon turned into one of the most important centres of Egyptian monasticism renowned throughout the empire.¹⁰ The rhetor’s remark on the veneration of the relics is more mysterious. The hagiographic tradition preserves the information about the sole martyr cult in the region, namely that of Cyrus and John. The circumstances of its establishment were the following.

Up until the end of the 4th century, Canopus was one of the most important centres of paganism in Egypt.¹¹ One of the most revered of its shrines was the

⁷ Antoninus of Canopus (c. 340 – c. 390 CE) – a philosopher and prophet, son of the theurgist Sosipatra of Ephesus and Eustathius of Cappadocia. Antoninus studied under Aedesius of Pergamon. After the death of his parents and mentor he moved to Canopus, where he headed a religious-philosophical school (Eunap. VS. 470–3). See: *PLRE* 1, 75 (Antoninus 7); Goulet (1994) 257–8 (s.v. ‘Antoninus 221’); Penella (1990) 58–9; Watts (2006) 188–90.

⁸ On his anti-pagan campaign, see: Athanassiadi (1993) 14–16; Haas (1997) 160–9; Hahn (2004) 81–92; Kaplow (2005) 9–11; Russell (2006) 7–10; Hahn (2008); Frankfurter (2010) 186–8.

⁹ Greek text passages of Eunapius’ VS are cited from the edition of Becker (2013). English translations are taken from Wright (1921).

¹⁰ See Orlandi (1970) 61–2; Hieron. *Reg. Pachom.* pref. On the history of this monastery, see Gascou (1991).

¹¹ For the pagan cults of Canopus and Menouthis in general, see Kayser (1992).

oracle of the goddess of female fertility and healing, Isis Medica, situated in Canopus' suburb Menouthis two miles east of the city proper.¹² The fame of the local cult extended far beyond the Delta – papyri glorifying the Lady of Menouthis as ἀλήθεια, apparently due to the accuracy of her prophecies, were found in Oxyrhynchus (POxy. XI 1380.63). Inscriptions in her honour were carved even in Ostia.¹³ At the end of the 4th century, Epiphanius of Cyprus mentioned Isis of Menouthis, listing the most famous (and the most licentious) heathen rites of Egypt (Epiph. *De fide* 12).¹⁴

The anti-pagan campaign of the archbishop Theophilus, which led to the destruction of the temples of Alexandria and Canopus, apparently bypassed this shrine. Despite the ban on all forms of pagan worship issued in 392 (*Cod. Theod.* 16.10.10ff), the sanctuary of Isis continued to function up to the 480s¹⁵ and even retained a professional priesthood.¹⁶ In the first decades of the 5th century, the Menouthis shrine, which remained one of the few operating pagan sanctuaries in the Delta, turned into a serious obstacle to the Christianization of the region. The ecclesiastical authorities of Alexandria were especially concerned about the rumours that the temple of the goddess was visited even by some lukewarm Christians, who prayed to Isis for healing. Theophilus' successor Cyril denounced those of his flock who went to the temple of the 'Lady' in the hope of being healed by spending the night in the den of a deceitful 'demoness' (Cyril. *Hom. Div.* 18.2 [PG 77. Col. 1101–1102]). The dangers that the cult of Isis once posed for the local Christians were also acknowledged by Sophronius, who mentioned that the goddess was venerated even by 'the faithful, bearing the signs of Christ' (*Laud.* 25 [PG 87.3, col 3411–3412]). To create a Christian alternative to the pagan healing cult, Cyril transferred to Menouthis the newfound relics said to belong to the previously unheard-of martyrs Cyrus and John, the unmercenary physicians (i.e., those who did not accept payment for their services), who had allegedly suffered during the Great Persecution.¹⁷

¹² The distance between Canopus and Menouthis is mentioned in Cyril. *Hom. Div.* 18.3. pref. [PG 77, col. 1103–1104]. Cf. with the evidence that Canopus was situated 12 miles from Alexandria (Amm. Marc. 22.16.14) and Menouthis, 14 miles from Alexandria (Zach. V. Sev. BF17 (A17)). See also Steph. Byz. *Ethn.* 445 (ed. Meineke); Stolz (2008) 203–5. For the cult of Isis Medica, see Witt (1971) 185–97.

¹³ For an epigraphic record of the worship of this cult, see Vidman (1969) 202 n. 403, 203 n. 406, and 258 n. 556a.

¹⁴ On Epiphanius and his work, see Jacobs (2016).

¹⁵ The destruction of the sanctuary at the end of the 480s was described by Zacharias of Mytilene – the eyewitness of this event. See Zach. V. Sev. BF35–48 (A28–36).

¹⁶ The pagan priesthood was outlawed in 396 (*Cod. Theod.* 16.10.14). For the evidence of the existence of the priesthood of Isis in Menouthis up to the end of the 5th century, see Zach. V. Sev. BF18–19 (A18–19); BF25 (A22); BF33 (A27); BF35 (A28); BF46 (A34); BF48–49 (A35–36). On the preservation of the pagan priesthood in other regions of Egypt in the 5th century, see in Panopolis: Ps. Dios. *Pan. Mac.* 10; 12; 14 (ed. and trans. Bolotov [1884]); Shenoute, *The Lord Thundered*, pref. (ed. et trans. Timbie and Zaborowski [2006]); in Abydos: V. Mos. P. 77–80 (ed. et trans. Moussa [2003]).

¹⁷ This event was dated to 414/5, 417 or 427/8 CE. See McGuckin (1993) 292 n. 6; Wessel (2004) 50; Lampada (2015) 57; Graf (2015) 260. Either way, this must have occurred before the beginning of

The idea that Eunapius' story reflects the information on the establishment of the cult of Cyrus and John in Menouthis was already expressed by Delehaye as far back as 1911.¹⁸ However, the Bollandist did not use his observations to clarify the dating of the VS. Those few who paid attention to his notion left it without any comments¹⁹ or denied it any credibility. Notably, Wipszycka stated that when speaking about the necrolatry of the monks of Canopus, Eunapius had in mind some other martyr cult, not those of Cyrus and John. She substantiated her remarks with a seemingly self-evident fact – Eunapius described the events which happened in Canopus, not Menouthis.²⁰

These objections seem controversial at the very least. First of all, our sources did not preserve any information that, in addition to those of Cyrus and John, there were any other Christian relics in or near Canopus. Moreover, according to Cyril's homilies, it was the absence of holy relics in the city and its environs before the establishment of this cult that forced Christians seeking healing to make distant pilgrimages or to appeal to pagan priests (Cyr. *Hom. Div.* 18.2 [PG. 77, col. 1101–1102]). Besides that, the suspiciously timely discovery of the relics of previously unknown martyrs (information about their whereabouts was allegedly revealed to Cyril by an angel) (Sophron. *Laud.* 27 [PG 87.3, col. 3413–3414]; *Vita SS. Cyri et Ioannis I* [PG 87.3, col. 3693–3694]), as well as the similarity of the traditional form of ritual appeal to the goddess – 'The Lady' – with the name of one of the saints (cf. Κυρία or Κυρά and Κῦρον),²¹ hints that the whole story of their martyrdom and the miraculous discovery of their relics was a fiction, invented by the archbishop. If some revered relics had already been exposed in the churches of Canopus or the surrounding villages before the establishment of the cult of Cyrus and John, Cyril would hardly have to go for this rather obvious fraud. Therefore, it seems that before 412 CE, the local Christian community did not possess any holy relics. This implies that Eunapius could not have been referring to some unknown martyr cult that existed in the vicinity of Canopus before Cyril's times.

The seeming contradiction between Eunapius and the Christian sources in the localisation of the cult is not hard to resolve either. First of all, Eunapius had never been to Egypt and could simply not notice any difference between Canopus and its suburb.²² Furthermore, in his narrative of the Christian 'invasion' of Canopus, Eunapius specifically stipulated that the pogroms of pagan temples were not limited to the city proper, but also affected its environs (καὶ τὰ περὶ τὸν Κάνωβον ἱερὰ ταῦτὸ τοῦτο ἔπασχον, Eunap. VS 472). One can assume that, as he continued his narrative with the criticism of the Christian necrolatry, Eunapius once again spoke not only about Canopus but also about the nearby villages. Finally, the preface to one

the Nestorian controversy in 430. See Montserrat (1998) 261. On the question of whether the cult of Cyrus and John was introduced to Canopus in the archbishopric of Cyril, see the appendix.

¹⁸ Delehaye (1911) 450.

¹⁹ E.g., Maraval (1985) 318 n. 52.

²⁰ Wipszycka (1988) 142.

²¹ Lur'e (1960) 99; Athanassiadi (1993) 15; Csepregi (2015) 54.

²² See n. 12 above.

of Cyril's sermons informs that on the way from Alexandria to Menouthis, the relics were displayed in the church of Holy Apostles in the monastery of Metanoia for several days (Cyr. *Hom. Div.* 18.2. pref. [PG 77, col. 1101–1102]).²³ In other words, the local monks had participated in the ceremony and the relics were kept in the city at least for some time. Such a significant event for the Alexandrian archbishop as a translation of the 'newly discovered' holy relics was undoubtedly accomplished with great fanfare, which could not fail to attract the attention of the local population. One might think that among them were the disciples of Canopus' philosopher Antoninus, who informed Eunapius that the 'men in black' began to drag the corpses of 'slaves and criminals' into the city. Therefore, all of this is perfectly in line with Eunapius' story – the monks had 'collected the bones and skulls' of some 'martyrs', brought them to Canopus, and venerated them in their 'sepulchre', i.e., local church.²⁴

Thus, we have all the reasons to believe that Eunapius' story about the religious practices of the monks of Canopus reflects information regarding the translation of relics of Cyrus and John to the city and their subsequent transportation to Menouthis. Since this event took place at the time when Cyril headed the Church of Alexandria, we may consider the beginning of his archbishopric (October 18, 412) (Socrates, *HE* 7.7) as a reliable *terminus post quem* for the publication of *VS*.²⁵

Appendix

Some scholars expressed doubts that the cult of Cyrus and John was introduced to Canopus under Cyril. The main sources on its establishment are the works of Sophronius of Jerusalem (c. 560–632 CE), two versions of the martyrs' *Vita*, compiled no earlier than the 6th century, Coptic and Greek synaxaries of the 7th–10th centuries. Therefore, all these texts reflect a relatively late tradition and cannot be considered sufficiently convincing evidence that the veneration of these martyrs in the vicinity of Canopus began under Cyril. The authenticity of the anonymous Nestorian's *Epistle to Cosmas* (12), which tells of the veneration of Cyrus and John in Canopus-Abukir in the second half of the 5th century, also raises some doubts.²⁶ The only contemporary source mentioning

²³ Delehay (1911) 450.

²⁴ The idea that Christian churches that housed relics were in fact nothing but 'tombs' and 'sepulchres' was quite widespread among the pagans. See, e.g.: Julian. *Or.* 7.228c; *Mis.* 344a; 357c; *Gal.* 335c, 339e–340a; *Lib. Or.* 17.7, 60.5.

²⁵ However, it would be rash to claim that they completely devalue the arguments of Banchich. Even though *VS* is a relatively small work, it is possible that it was written in several passes. Eunapius could have begun to make the first sketches of *VS* in 399 or 400 CE, then have been distracted by other matters and continued his work on the text after a decade and a half. Moreover, Eunapius may have made a later revision of his original text. On the textual fluidity and authorial revisions of texts in Classical and Late Antiquity, see Dahlman (2018). The discussion of an old hypothesis of the possible existence of a second edition of *VS* goes beyond the scope of this paper. For an overall skeptical review of the debate of this issue, see Penella (1990) 19–23.

²⁶ See Nau (1919) 274, but cf. Abramowski (1963) 15–20 for a more positive view.

the cult of Cyrus and John are three short sermons ascribed to Cyril of Alexandria himself (Cyril. *Hom. Div.* 18.1–3 [PG. 77, col. 1100–1106]).

Based on the historical context of these sermons, Duchesne doubted the authorship of Cyril, as well as his participation in the establishment of this cult. In his opinion, the veneration of Cyrus and John in the vicinity of Canopus began only at the end of the 5th century, during the archbishopric of Peter Mongus.²⁷ This publication gave rise to a long controversy about the time of the emergence of this martyr cult. On the side of the opponents of traditional dating, the last word was spoken by Gascou, who had conducted a historical-philological analysis of the sermons and, in general, stood against Cyril's authorship.²⁸ At the same time, he noted that in terms of style and subject, the third homily is very close to other works of the archbishop, and generally recognised that it could well be written by him. Notwithstanding these observations, Gascou believed that even if this sermon was indeed composed by Cyril, the only indication that it was delivered in Menouthis is its preamble, which he thought to be a later interpolation.²⁹

However, the main text of this sermon contains clear indications of the place it was given. It begins with a discourse on the passions of Christ and the virtues of Cyrus and John. Then it follows with some blasphemies on the delusions of idolaters and the tricks of the pagan priests:

οὐδείς γὰρ ἡμῖν ὄνειράτα πλάττεται· οὐδείς λέγει τοῖς ἐρχομένοις·
 Εἴρηκεν ἡ Κυρά· Ποίησον τὸ καὶ τὸ· ὅλως Κυρὰ καὶ Θεὸς εἶναι
 δυνατὸς, καὶ προσκυνεῖσθαι θέλει· Ἐν τοῖς δαίμοσιν οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲν
 ἄρρεν οὐδὲ θῆλυ. Καὶ βλέπετε ποῖαν ἔχουσιν προαίρεσιν· ὀνόμασιν
 γυναικῶν καλεῖσθαι βούλονται πατήσαντες τοῖνυν τὰ γραῶδη μυθάρια
 καὶ τὰ πάλα τῶν γοήτων ἐμπαίγματα, ἐρχέσθωσαν ἐπὶ τοὺς ἀληθινούς
 καὶ ἀνωθεν ἰατρούς· οἷς ὁ πάντα ἰσχύων Θεὸς, τοῦ θεραπεύειν
 δύνασθαι τὴν ἐξουσίαν ἐχαρίσατο λέγων· Ἄσθενοῦντας θεραπεύετε·
 δωρεὰν ἐλάβετε, δωρεὰν δότε'

Cyr. *Hom. Div.* 18.3 (PG. 77, col. 1105–1106)

For nobody will pretend to you that they have visions. No one will tell visitors: "The Mistress said: Do this and that." Does she really want to be both a mistress and a powerful god and to be venerated? Demons are neither male nor female, and yet look at their conduct: they like to be called by the names of women! Therefore, let those people trample down these silly cronish myths and the old frauds of the charlatans, and come to the true heavenly doctors, to whom the almighty God has granted the power of healing, saying: "Heal the sick. Freely you have received; freely give."³⁰

²⁷ Duchesne (1910) 10–12.

²⁸ Gascou (2007) 251–7.

²⁹ Gascou (2007) 256–7.

³⁰ English translation is taken from Rizos (2018).

This passage implies that the sermon was preached during the transfer of the relics of Cyrus and John to the region known for a pagan cult of a female deity ('the Lady'), famous for the practice of ritual incubation (i.e., sleeping in a sacred area to experience a divinely inspired dream or cure). All of this points to Menouthis: up to the 7th century the city was the largest centre of veneration of Cyrus and John (hence the medieval and modern name of the city – Abukir); 'the Lady' (κυρία or κυρά) was the standard euphemism for Isis;³¹ incubation was practiced in the temple of Menouthis up until the end of the 5th century (Zach. V. Sev. BF17–18 (A17–18)). In other words, the information presented in the main body of the text of the sermon clearly indicates that it was delivered at Menouthis. Thus, we have all reason to believe that the emergence of the cult of holy relics in the vicinity of Canopus dates to the archbishopric of Cyril.³²

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³¹ E.g., Lur'e (1960) 99–100; Fraser (1962) 147.

³² For a refutation of other arguments of opponents of traditional dating, see Montserrat (1998) 261–4; Watts (2009) 125; Watts (2010) 8 n. 38, and 267.

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