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Brushes with the Imperium:
Letters of Synesius of Cyrene and Augustine of Hippo on Crisis

1. Introduction

A great deal has been written over the past few decades on the evolution of episcopal power and influence in late antiquity, and on how bishops identified themselves over against either the imperium, or else spheres of ecclesiastical power and influence, such as those at Rome and Constantinople.¹ In this paper, I will be dealing with the correspondence of two men who lived on or close to the Mediterranean shore of the same continent, and whose episcopal careers overlapped at least for some years at the beginning of the fifth century CE.² They were both cultured men who had had distinguished careers before becoming bishops, and they died within fifteen years of each other. There, however, the similarities come to an abrupt halt. One was Greek-speaking, the other Latin-speaking. As far as we know, these two men never met, and, if they had, they probably would not have had much in common to talk about, even if they could have understood each other linguistically or culturally. Synesius’ bishopric was short; Augustine’s was long. Augustine’s surviving epistolary correspondence is almost twice the size of that of Synesius. They had totally different orientations towards the Roman imperium – Synesius gravitated to Constantinople, where he had close connections with the imperial court, but particularly to Alexandria; Augustine, although anchored in Hippo Regius, looked not only east and west to the Latin-speaking provinces of Africa, but also to Italy. My intention in this paper, on the basis of the letters of these two men, is to investigate their cultural and political horizons, their networks, and how each of them responded to a particular crisis of their time.

Synesius’ episcopate has been variously calculated;³ suffice it to say here that I am following the chronology established by Denis Roques in his 1989 study of Synesius’ letters, which runs as follows: Synesius was elected bishop of Ptolomais probably in the

³ See D. Roques, Études sur la Correspondance de Synésios de Cyrène, Collection Latomus 205 (Brussels 1989), 11–64.
first half of February 411; he was consecrated bishop by Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria only on 1 January 412, and died mid-413. We are therefore considering an extremely short episcopate, which nonetheless, following this chronology, produced a total of forty-nine surviving letters out of 156. On the other hand, Augustine’s episcopate in Hippo, which can be calculated accurately, extended over a thirty-five-year period and from it approximately 300 letters have come down to us – once again, of course, only a small portion of what he must have written during that time.

In what follows, I am arguing that one of the most important avenues of assistance for late antique bishops when they had to exercise forms of crisis management either with regard to imperium or church was their epistolary networks, which were often connected to how they construed culture and imperium.

2. Networks and Horizons

i. Synesius

Let us first consider briefly Synesius’ horizons and networks as revealed in his letters. He was a cultivated Greek-speaker, a curialis who naturally gravitated east and north-east from Pentapolis. Because of the years he spent in Constantinople at the imperial court before his consecration as bishop of Ptolemais (here again the chronology is disputed) and the contacts he retained in Constantinople, a considerable part of his networking involved friends and officials in the imperial capital. However, his Egyptian connections, both pagan

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4 See Roques, Études, 64.
7 See Roques, Études, 47–64, for a summary of the status quaestionis.