

Notes et discussions

A Note on the Date of the Fall of Ravenna (540) in Agnellus' *Liber pontificalis ecclesiae Rauennatis*

The chronology of the capture of Ravenna by Belisarius in 540 is based upon the life of the bishop Ursicinus in the *Liber pontificalis ecclesiae Rauennatis* of Agnellus of Ravenna. The only manuscript which preserves this part of the text, namely cod. Lat. 371 (= alfa.P.4.9) of the Biblioteca Estense of Modena, reads: *et in mense Madio ipso anno ingressus est Belisarius patricius in ciuitate Classis, et ingressus est Rauennam* (Agn. Rav. 62). Holder-Egger accepts the reading *Madio*, agreeing with the choice of Testi Rasponi, but Deliyannis conjectures *Martio*.¹ In her translation of the *Liber pontificalis*, Deliyannis argues that “the manuscript has *Madio*, which is an error for either *Maiio* [*sic*] (May) or *Martio* (March). Many scholars have accepted the date as May, but others have pointed out that, according to Procopius’s chronology, this event took place in March [...], and the text has been restored accordingly”.²

This emendation would change the chronology of the first phase of the Gothic War by anticipating the fall of Ravenna, which allegedly took place in March 540 and not in May 540, the month which has been traditionally accepted by scholars. Such a dating would have significant implications, since Belisarius took Ravenna shortly after two envoys of Justinian, Domnicus and Maximinus, had come to the city and discussed different proposals for peace (Proc. Caes., *Bell. Goth.* 2.29.1-16). Travelling from Ravenna to Constantinople and back again took at least three months (Agn. Rav. 132), which suggests that around one and a half months were necessary in order to reach Ravenna from Byzantium. If Deliyannis’ conjecture is correct, then Justinian’s envoys would have departed in late January / early February at the latest, in what was one of the most dangerous times of the year for sailing (Veg., *Mil.* 4.39 reports that the sea was considered as ‘closed’ – *mare clausum* – from 11th November to 10th March).³ On the one hand, Domnicus and Maximinus were high-ranking members of the senate of Constantinople (Maximinus would become *praefectus praetorio* of Italy two years later) and it is not clear why Justinian would have put their lives at risk by charging them with an embassy to Italy in January. On the other hand, they would have left Constantinople around the middle of March, immediately after the ancient sailing season resumed, if Ravenna fell in May. Moreover, Belisarius must have remained in Ravenna for more than two months before leaving for Constantinople, if the city was taken in March, and his failure to thwart the rebellion of the Gothic soldiers stationed at garrisons over many strongholds in Northern Italy is hard to explain for such an experienced general.

In addition, Procopius (*Bell. Goth.* 2.29) does not offer a precise chronology of Ravenna’s fall. The only information which possesses a good degree of certainty is that Belisarius departed shortly afterwards, when “the winter drew to its close and the fifth

¹ HOLDER-EGGER (1878), p. 322; TESTI RASPONI (1924), p. 176; DELIYANNIS (2006), p. 232.

² DELIYANNIS (2004), p. 178, n. 2.

³ ROUGÉ (1952).

year ended in this war, the history of which Prokopios has written” (*Bell. Goth.* 2.30.30: ὁ χειμῶν ἔληγε, καὶ τὸ πέμπτον ἔτος ἐτελεύτα τῷ πολέμῳ τῷδε, ὃν Προκόπιος ζυνέγραψεν). At first sight, this passage might corroborate Deliyannis’ conjecture, as it would be tempting to identify the end of the winter with the month of March. But the years of the Gothic War began in June (possibly with the solstice) according to Procopius.⁴ Therefore, Belisarius must have left Italy in June and this information is of little help in establishing the date of the capture of the city.

There is a final, more serious objection to Deliyannis’ reconstruction. *Madius* is no more than an orthographic variant of *Maius*, which was quite common in Medieval manuscripts, as is shown by the corresponding entry in Du Cange’s dictionary (“*Madius*, *Maius mensis*, nostris *May*”) as well as by Papias (*Madius mensis*, *dictus quod tunc terra madiat, qui et Maius*).⁵

In conclusion, since Ravenna was taken in May 540 according to the *Liber pontificalis ecclesiae Rauennatis*, if Agnellus’ text requires emendation here (which I doubt), this should consist in introducing the reading *Maio* (and not *Martio*) instead of *Madio*.

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⁴ See KÖRBS (1913), p. 51-65.

⁵ DU CANGE *et al.* (1883-1887), vol. 5, col. 165b <<http://ducange.enc.sorbonne.fr/MADIUS1>>; MOMBRITIUS (1496), p. 95.