

DOCTORS AS DIPLOMATS IN THE SIXTH CENTURY A.D.

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Medicine in the Roman world was a Greek science, and the majority of its practitioners were, and continued to be, men of Greek background and culture, if not of Greek origin. The Greeks themselves held various opinions of doctors and medicine, perhaps adverse more often than not. The Homeric line, "A doctor is a man worth many others" (*Il.* 11.514), is more than balanced by Plato's scepticism about the social value of much medicine (*Rep.* III.405A-10B) and the continuing chorus of complaints over quackery and exorbitant fees. The Romans, suspicious as often of foreign skills and those who professed them, generally treated Greek physicians with reserve, while making use of them. The majority of doctors amongst the Romans were of comparatively low status, slaves or freedmen attached to the great houses, though some of the famous doctors of the late Republic and early Empire were freeborn.¹

In the Roman world the status of doctor as doctor was never high. When he did achieve repute or rank, that usually depended not upon his practice of medicine as such, but upon the social or political connections that accrued to him from his success in it.² It is doubtful whether the famous doctor of the fourth century A.D., Oribasius, would have enjoyed his fame and political influence had he not been the physician and confidant of the future Emperor Julian,³ or whether the physician (also of the fourth century) Julius Ausonius would have become praetorian prefect

of Illyricum, had not his son, also Ausonius, risen to prominence as the tutor and later the advisor of the young Emperor Gratian.⁴ In general the repute and status of doctors remained low in the late Empire.⁵

There is, however, one exception, the corps of palace doctors of the late Empire, the *archiatri sacri palatii*. These, upon their appointment, ranked as senators⁶ and for good service could be awarded the title of count of the first order (*comes primi ordinis*), coming in order of precedence with diocesan governors (*vicarii*) and above, for instance, architects, who, upon receipt of the same title, came only with provincial governors of consular rank.⁷ Moreover, it is clearly recognized by the *Theodosian Code* that *archiatri* could pass on to an administrative career at a comparatively high level,⁸ and we have the names of two who did so: Caesarius, the brother of Gregory Nazianzen, who became head of the provincial treasury (*comes thesaurorum*) of Bithynia,⁹ and Vindicianus, who became a diocesan governor.¹⁰

Indeed, during that part of the sixth century which coincided with the reign of the Persian king Khosro I (531-79 A.D.) we find three doctors involved at the very highest level of public activity, serving on embassies to the Persians and playing not a secondary but a leading role in the negotiations. By this period Rome and Persia had come to concede to each other the status of great powers and, as a result, had formalized their relations and developed a detailed protocol for negotiations.¹¹ When formal diplomatic contact was made, two kinds of embassies were used, minor and major.¹² The former served routine purposes, such as the conveyance of official acknowledgments or congratulations and were often used to blood younger diplomats, who were given no independent powers of action on these missions. The latter, which dealt with the substantive issues usually involved in treaty- or truce-negotiations, operated within general guidelines but often with a considerable degree of freedom, and thus they were carried out by men of the highest status, senior civil or military officials. One, and possibly two, of our doctor-envoys were involved in such major embassies.

The first of the doctor-envoys was one Stephanus who, when Khosro was besieging Edessa in 544, acted as spokesman for an embassy which tried to persuade the Persian king to leave the city. According to

Procopius (*Wars* II.26.31-37), the physician was chosen by the Edessenes because he had cured Khosro's father, king Kawad, of an illness and had been greatly rewarded for his success. In the speech which Procopius gives to Stephanus the doctor, in asking Khosro to leave the city unharmed, says that while he was at Kawad's court he had fostered the young Khosro and had aided in his succession to the throne. Khosro refused to heed these pleas and the embassy failed.

Stephanus' embassy was not a state-embassy, and he was chosen as spokesman because of his supposed special relationship with the Persian court. However, the embassy in which the Syrian doctor Uranius participated was a state-embassy and might have been major. Our information upon this embassy comes from a hostile source, the historian Agathias (II.29.1-32.2), who describes Uranius as a doctor by profession who habitually involved himself in disputes with philosophers, modelling himself on the Empiricists Pyrrho and Sextus.¹³ Some time after 532¹⁴ he accompanied Areobindus on an embassy to Khosro. The purpose and result of the embassy are unknown, but if its leader was one of the Areobindus's known to us¹⁵ its status was probably major. At any rate, according to Agathias, Uranius played the philosopher and so impressed Khosro that the king admitted him to conversation at the royal table, lavished rewards on him, and, when Uranius had returned to Constantinople, sent him a letter of appreciation.

Our information on the embassies of the third doctor, Zacharias, which comes mostly from the detailed fragments of the *History of Menander the Guardsman*, is much fuller.¹⁶ Frags. 37 and 38 tell that shortly after the unstable Emperor Justin II had gone mad (A.D. 574), his mind unhinged by the loss of the important fortress of Daras to the Persians, Khosro sent a letter proposing peace-talks. The Empress Sophia, who, with the Caesar (later Emperor) Tiberius II, was ruling for Justin, replied that she would send an envoy with full powers to treat (καὶ ἀμφὶ τῶν ὀπισθοῦν κεκνημένων διαλεχθῆσόμενον, frag. 37). Zacharias of Sura,¹⁷ one of the royal doctors (the Greek is an equivalent of *archiatrus sacri palatii*), was sent with the status of major envoy (μέγιστην πρεσβυτην, frag. 38), and for the payment of 45,000 *solidi*¹⁸ he obtained a truce of one year in the East, Armenia excepted. In the following year Zacharias

was back in Persia, accompanied by an ex-quaestor of the sacred palace and patrician, Trajan. This embassy, which was also of major status,¹⁹ made, after hard negotiations, a truce of three years in the East (Armenia again excepted) for a payment by the Romans of 30,000 *solidi* per year.²⁰

As the sources appear to acknowledge, Trajan, the ex-quaestor and patrician, was the nominal head of the embassy,²¹ but that Zacharias was the real principal in the negotiations is demonstrated by his continuing role in the exchanges before and after this embassy and by later explicit statements by Menander. Three years later, in 578, Tiberius, in an attempt to create a comprehensive and durable peace, sent a major embassy to Persia consisting of Theodorus, the count of the treasury (*comes sacrarum largitionum*), John and Peter, both ex-consuls, and again Zacharias. On this occasion Theodorus was probably the nominal head, although in frag. 46 Menander treats him and Zacharias together as principals. An unexpected Roman defeat in Armenia rendered the negotiations more difficult and protracted (frag. 47), and at this juncture Zacharias' central role becomes clear. For in an attempt to break the impasse he conferred in secret with the Persian envoy Mebod and offered him terms upon confidential instructions from Tiberius which were, according to Menander (*loc. cit.*), communicated only to him and to the Caesar Maurice. Despite this effort the talks dragged on amidst mutual suspicion, and in frag. 50 we find Theodorus, John, and Peter apparently withdrawn and Zacharias joined by Trajan. Eventually, the gap between the parties proving too wide, the talks broke down, and forty days before the expiry of the three-year truce Khosro ordered an invasion of Roman territory in order to forestall a build-up of enemy forces.²²

The defeat of the Persian army of invasion and the death of its commander encouraged Tiberius to begin another peace-initiative in the next year (579). He despatched envoys to return Persian prisoners as a gesture of good-will and to undertake talks as a major embassy with wide powers.²³ Zacharias was again sent together with others including Theodorus, apparently not the same person as the envoy of 578.²⁴ Menander (frag. 54) comments at this point upon the great utility of Zacharias' embassies for the Romans and indicates his position as advisor on Persian

relations by remarking that it was he who suggested the peace-initiative. For this mission Zacharias was given the title of ex-consul and would, therefore, have been its titular as well as real principal. The ambassadors set out for Persia, but halted on the order of Tiberius who had, meanwhile, received an embassy from Persia seeking a truce and peace-talks. Shortly afterwards Khosro died, out of grief, it was said (Evagrius, *HE* 5.15), at the reverses suffered by his armies. Nevertheless, the Roman envoys were ordered to proceed according to instructions to the court of his successor, Hormizd IV, who received them haughtily, treated them badly, and sent them home, their mission unaccomplished (frag. 55).²⁵ In the subsequent year (580) we catch the last glimpse of Zacharias, yet again in negotiations with the Persians, outwitting their ambassador, Andigan, and failing to conclude peace (frag. 60).

Why, then, were doctors -- not usually the most prestigious of people -- used in this way for tasks of such high status and importance? John of Ephesus (*HE* 6.12) points to one reason when he calls Zacharias not only a doctor but also a sophist. Greek medical science, like science in general, originated in philosophy, and the relationship between medicine and philosophy was frequently maintained.²⁶ Celsus, in the introduction to his *De Medicina* (*proem.* 13-44), summarizes the debate between those who urged that speculation, and thus a close connexion with philosophy, was necessary for good medical practice, and those (the Empiricists) who held that practical knowledge was the sole prerequisite.²⁷ Thus, while the majority of doctors gained their knowledge from experience and practised as craftsmen, with the rather low status comparable to that enjoyed by most craftsmen in antiquity, a few studied medicine as a science and, therefore, as a part of a more general philosophy.²⁸ The doctor as philosopher and, conversely, the philosopher as doctor were well established in the Graeco-Roman world.²⁹ Two examples, both mentioned by Eunapius in his *Lives of the Sophists*, will suffice: the renowned physician Oribasius received an early philosophical training, and the doctor Ionicus studied all kinds of philosophy, rhetoric, and poetry.³⁰

In the late Empire men of literary, philosophical, and especially oratorical accomplishments (often loosely termed "sophists") could pursue diplomatic and political careers. The following two examples, out

of many, are of activity in the area which is the subject of this paper. In 358 the sophist Eustathius was sent as part of an embassy to the Persian king Shapur II and, according to the over-enthusiastic account of Eunapius, acquitted himself well.³¹ Again, Procopius (*Wars* II.24.3), who was himself a man of literary training in a political career, says that in 543 the Emperor Justinian sent to Khosro I the ambassadors Sergius and Constantianus, both trained speakers.³² Clearly, of the three physicians discussed above, Uranius and Zacharias fall into this category. For Agathias devotes most of his attack upon Uranius to his philosophical activity, and Zacharias was not only a sophist but also an archdeacon of orthodox faith who had been active in trying to mend the breach between Justin II and the dissident monophysite bishops whom he had imprisoned.³³

In the case of Zacharias a second consideration suggests itself. He was an *archiatrus sacri palatii*, a high-ranking member of the Emperor's personal staff, who had opportunities for access to the Emperor similar to, and in some respects even more intimate than, those enjoyed by the palace-chamberlains. The manner in which the chamberlains exploited this access to increase their personal influence and official power has often been illustrated and discussed.³⁴ As far as I am aware, the same suggestion has not been made in respect of the *archiatri*. But the career of Zacharias appears to show an ambitious and able physician taking his chance to move into negotiating, firstly in Church affairs, where he would have had some expertise as an archdeacon, and then in international diplomacy, where he established himself as an expert in Persian affairs.

However, there is a third reason for inclusion of doctors on embassies to the Persians at this period which is as important as their prestige as philosophers or their personal standing within the palace, and that is simply their skill as doctors. Although the early Sassanid rulers of Persia, unlike the Arsacid dynasty which preceded them, vigorously asserted Iranian identity and culture, the later Sassanid monarchs returned to a more open attitude towards their western neighbours (while conceding nothing to them politically or militarily). The influence was not, of course, all one-way, as the late Roman state drew upon Persia, especially in political and administrative organization. But in the fifth and sixth centuries the Persian upper classes certainly took much

from the Graeco-Roman world. Roman captives were often marched off into Persia to be settled in areas where their skills could be put to use. Thus, Khosro himself, when he sacked Antioch in 540, built close to the Persian capital, Ctesiphon, a new city for the captives, which he called Khosro's Better Antioch (Veh Antiok Khosro);³⁵ and not far away was the commercial centre of Veh Ardasher (old Seleucia), which had a large population of Jews and Christians, many of whom had come from the Roman world.³⁶ Procopius himself, admittedly in a less reliable work than the *Wars* (*Anecd.* 25.25), alleges that Justinian taxed craftsmen so heavily that many fled to the Persians, an exaggeration perhaps, but one that probably reflects a certain movement across the border. Finally, when Kawad took Amida, according to Joshua the Stylite,³⁷ he enjoyed the Roman baths there and upon his return to Persia had some built for himself.

One of the Greek skills that greatly impressed the Persian rulers was medicine, which they often preferred to their native variety, employing Greek and Syrian doctors at court;³⁸ we have already met (p. 90-91) Stephanus, who cured Kawad of an illness. Usually these doctors were Christians, at times holding clerical office in their church; indeed, the success of a physician could lead to favours for the Christian communities in Persia. We hear of one Maruthas of Martyropolis who, when bishop of Mesopotamia, was sent by the Emperor Arcadius on a mission to king Yezdegerd I (399-421) and succeeded in curing the king (or his son -- the sources differ) of a headache which the magi, the Zoroastrian priests, had failed to alleviate; as a result, despite magian opposition, he was allowed to found Christian churches in Persia.³⁹ From a later reign, that of Kawad, we hear of Barzanes, another Christian bishop in favour with the king because of his medical skills.⁴⁰

Now this interest in Graeco-Roman skills in general and medicine in particular was very marked in Khosro. He continued and developed the policy of settling Roman captives in order to use their skills (it was he who founded the Better Antioch). In building he made use of Greek architects, and on one occasion Justinian even sent some to him upon request.⁴¹ To make Graeco-Roman skills more available to Persians he had Greek works translated into Pahlavi,⁴² thus providing the basis for some

Arabic translations. His knowledge of philosophy, although derided by Agathias (II.28.1-6) on the ground that a true knowledge of philosophy was inaccessible to a barbarian, was widely noted.⁴³ His general tolerance towards Christianity (despite periods of persecution) gave him a reputation for interest in that religion. It was claimed that his mother was a secret Christian,⁴⁴ and Evagrius (*HE* 4.28) even alleges that Khosro was converted on his deathbed.

There is considerable evidence of the activity of Greek doctors at Khosro's court. Joseph, the *catholicus* of the Christian community in Persia, was high in the king's favour because of his medical skills.⁴⁵ Influence is also said to have been enjoyed by the *archiaterus* Sergius⁴⁶ (who may well be the same as the ambassador Sergius sent to Persia by Justinian [see p.94] and who should in that case be added to the list of doctor-diplomats). Procopius himself says (*Wars* VIII.10.10-12) that Khosro was of a sickly disposition and that once when he was violently ill he gathered many physicians around him. One in particular, a Palestinian named Tribunus, was highly successful and richly rewarded, and he so impressed the king that as part of the peace-settlement of 545 Khosro asked Justinian to send Tribunus to him for one year.⁴⁷ Justinian complied, and while he was in residence at the Persian court Tribunus not only was able to ease the lot of Roman prisoners in Persia, gaining freedom for many, but also founded a hospital with twelve doctors,⁴⁸ perhaps the same as the medical school which an Arab source locates at Gundeshapur.⁴⁹

One of the great strengths of the late Romans was that they systematically studied the peoples around them and based their strategy in dealing with these peoples, both politically and militarily, upon the knowledge gained from such study. They were aware of the popularity of Greek medicine at the Persian court. They knew of Khosro's disposition towards illness and his admiration for Greek doctors. And, therefore, they often included doctors on embassies, especially major ones. It helped if these doctors had a philosophical or oratorical training (which seems usually to have been the case), but they were sent because they were doctors, since experience had shown that Khosro was predisposed

towards such people.⁵⁰

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NOTES

¹ Details in S. Treggiari, *Roman Freedmen During the Late Republic* (Oxford 1969) 129-32; A.M. Duff, *Freedmen in the Early Empire* (Oxford 1928) 119-20.

² Cf. J. Scarborough, *Roman Medicine* (Ithaca 1969) 112-3, whose examples are, however, of only middling-status activity.

³ Most recently on Oribasius, B. Baldwin, "The Career of Oribasius," *Acta Classica* 18 (1975) 85-97.

⁴ Details in *PLRE* I "Ausonius" 5.

⁵ Cf. A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602* (Oxford 1964) II.1013.

⁶ *CTh* XIII.3.2 (326 A.D.) and 15 (393 A.D.).

⁷ *CTh* VI.16.1 and 20.1 (413 A.D.).

⁸ *CTh* XIII.3.15 (393 A.D.) and 16 (414 A.D.). Presumably the doctor Arcadius, who is addressed as count in the title of Himerius' thirty-fourth Oration, is one who had received this title.

⁹ Details in *PLRE* I "Caesarius" 2.

¹⁰ References in Jones (at n. 5) III.335 n. 57.

¹¹ Here I follow E. Chrysos, "Some Aspects of Romano-Persian Legal Relations," *Kleronomia* 8 (1976) 1 ff., against the older and still persistent view of , e.g., F. Dölger, "Die Kaiserkunder der Byzantiner als Ausdruck ihrer politischen Anschauungen," *HZ* 159 (1939) 230 ff., that the Romans and Byzantines did not abandon their claim to universal empire. An interesting sidelight on the Persian attitude of the period is thrown by the story that Khosro I kept three empty thrones in case of a visit by the rulers of the Byzantines, the Chinese, and the Hephthalites (A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* [2nd ed., Copenhagen 1944] 411-12).

¹² For details of the protocol see R. Helm, "Untersuchungen über den auswärtigen diplomatischen Verkehr des römischen Reiches im Zeitalter der Spätantike," *Archiv für Urkundenforschung* 12 (1931-32) 375 ff., esp. 398-412.

¹³ I see no reason to follow *RE* IX.A.1 col. 947 ("Uranus" 5) in identifying Uranus with the Uranus of Apamea who is said by Damascius (*Vit. Isidori*, in Photius, *Bibl. cod.* 242 [vol. VI.28, ed. R. Henry]) to have been able to recognize magicians by their eyes. The hostility of Agathias probably arises from his hostility to the Empiricist philosophers. On the traditional connection of doctors with the school of Pyrrho see L. Edelstein, *Ancient Medicine. Selected Papers*, ed. O. and C.L. Temkin (Baltimore 1967) 352-53.

¹⁴ Uranus appears to have visited Khosro after the return of those philosophers who had fled Justinian's persecution (cf. Agathias II.32.1). This was agreed by treaty in 532.

¹⁵ Probably either the general who fought the Moors in Africa and was murdered there in 546 (Procopius, *Wars* IV.24.1, says that he was a senator of good birth), or the Areobindus who is addressed by Justinian in *Novellae* 145-47 as praetorian prefect of the East and formerly prefect of the city and master of the soldiers.

¹⁶ The fragments are quoted from C. Müller, *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum* IV (Paris 1851).

¹⁷ His place of origin is given by John of Ephesus, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, trans. E.W. Brooks (Louvain 1936 = *CSCO, Script. Syr.* III.3) 6.12. Sura was on the river Euphrates.

¹⁸ The Greek speaks of gold *nomismata*, which would have been the standard *solidi* tariffed at 72 to the lb. of gold. Thus, Zacharias promised 625 lbs. of gold. Michael Syrus (2.312) says that he took 650 lbs.

¹⁹ This is clear from frag. 41 (init.), which says that Theodorus, the son of Bacchus (not the same as the two Theodori mentioned below), was sent on a (minor) embassy to thank Khosro for his reception of Trajan.

²⁰ Evagrius, *HE* 5.12, refers to this embassy, though he confuses it with the earlier one of Zacharias alone (see E. Stein, *Studien zur*

Geschichte des byzantinischen Reiches [Stuttgart 1919] 54 n. 14).

²¹ So Menander, frag. 41 (cited at n. 19) and Evagrius (at n. 20). The latter calls him an eloquent old man and a senator. N.H. Baynes, in the *Cambridge Mediaeval History* II, 274, calls him "quaestor and physician," but "physician" is probably an error for "patrician."

²² John of Ephesus (at n. 17) mentions this embassy and says that the proceedings became so acrimonious that the parties came to blows. Menander, frag. 50, makes it clear that the Romans had been tardy with the payments agreed in the treaty of 575 and that the Persian general, Tamkhosro, had already made a sortie in order to pressure them into paying up -- which they did. It appears from John of Ephesus (*HE* 6.26) that even after the breakdown of the talks, Zacharias, acting with the bishops of (Persian) Nisibis and (Roman) Theodosiopolis, attempted to get them restarted.

²³ ἐφῆκε Ζαχαρία τε καὶ Θεοδώρου καὶ μεγίστων πρέσβεων ἔχειν ἰσχυρὸν καὶ τὴν εἰρήνην ὡς ἂν οἴοιτε ἔσονται διατιθέσθαι (frag. 54 init.).

²⁴ This Theodorus is described (loc. cit.) as one of the Imperial bodyguard who was promoted to general on this occasion.

²⁵ John of Ephesus (*HE* 6.22) also remarks the ill treatment of the legates. Hormizd had already shown his hostility by omitting the normal courtesy of sending an embassy to the Roman Emperor to announce his succession.

²⁶ See Edelstein (at n. 13) 349 ff.

²⁷ Cf. the debate summarized at the beginning of Plutarch's essay, "Advice about Keeping Well" (*Moralia* 122B ff.).

²⁸ Cf. Edelstein (at n. 13) 350-1.

²⁹ Most of the famous doctors of antiquity were from this group. Galen, who is the best known, regarded himself as much as a philosopher as a doctor.

³⁰ The references are Eunapius, *Vit. Soph.* (ed. Wright) 498 p. 532, and 499 pp. 536-8. Eunapius himself, a philosopher by training, practised medicine on occasion (*Vit. Soph.* 504-505 pp. 560-2).

³¹ *Vit. Soph.* 465 p. 394-466 p. 398. Eustathius, like Uranius, is said to have captivated the Persian king. Ammianus Marcellinus (XVII.14.1-2) is drier, merely noting that the embassy failed.

³² Also the literary man Olympiodorus (J. Matthews, "Olympiodorus of Thebes and the History of the West A.D. 407-425," *JRS* 60 [1970] 79 ff.), the "sophist" and historian Priscus (*RE* XXIII.1 col. 9, "Priscus" 35) and Epigenes (Priscus, frag. 1).

³³ N.H. Baynes, in the *Cambridge Mediaeval History* II, 265; John of Ephesus, *HE* 1.19.

³⁴ The best discussion is by M.K. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves. Sociological Studies in Roman History* I (Cambridge 1978) ch. 4.

³⁵ Procopius, *Wars* II.14.1; Christensen (at n. 11) 368-87.

³⁶ Christensen (at n. 11) 387-8.

³⁷ Joshua the Stylite, *A History of the Time of Affliction at Ôrhâi and Âmid and throughout all Mesopotamia*, trans. W. Wright (Cambridge 1882) 75.

³⁸ Christensen (at n. 11) 396 and 419-25.

³⁹ Socrates, *HE* 7.8; Theophanes, *Chron. a.* 5916; Barhebraeus, *Chron.* (ed. and trans. Abbeloos and Lamy, Louvain 1872) II.47 ff.

⁴⁰ Theophanes, *Chron. a.* 6016.

⁴¹ Theophylactus 5.6.

⁴² R. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia* (London 1962) 231-2.

⁴³ Christensen (at n. 11) 425-9. The Syriac sources (e.g. John of Ephesus, *HE* 6.20) are less hostile than the Greeks Agathias and Procopius.

⁴⁴ Zacharias of Mytilene, *HE* (trans. Hamilton and Brooks, London 1899) 9.6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 12.7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 9.19.

⁴⁷ Procopius, *Wars* II.28.8-10. See also the *Suda*, s.v. Τριβοῦνος, and Zacharias of Mytilene (*HE* 12.7), who wrongly calls him Tribunian and says that on the first occasion he was captured and taken to Persia.

⁴⁸ Zacharias of Mytilene, loc. cit.

⁴⁹ Tabari, trans. Th. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sassaniden* (1879; rpt. Leiden 1973) 41-2.

⁵⁰ Evagrius, *HE* 5.12, says that the envoys sent to Khosro in 576 reminded him that when he was ill the Romans had sent their best doctors to him.