

The *omnimoda historia* of Nummius Aemilianus Dexter: A Latin Translation of Eusebius' Chronography?

Lieve Van Hoof
Universiteit Gent, Belgium
lieve.vanhoof@ugent.be

Abstract

This article discusses two problems of interpretation in the entry on Dexter in Jerome's *De viris illustribus* (Hier. vir. ill.). In particular, it offers the first detailed discussion of the information we possess on Dexter's *omnimoda historia*, and suggests that it may have been a Latin translation and/or adaptation of the first part of the chronicle of Eusebius, the so-called chronography.

Keywords

Dexter – chronicles – historiography – Jerome

This article discusses two problems of interpretation in the entry on Dexter in Jerome's *De viris illustribus* (Hier. vir. ill.). In particular, it offers the first detailed discussion of the information we possess on Dexter's *omnimoda historia*, and suggests that it may have been a Latin translation and/or adaptation of the first part of the chronicle of Eusebius, the so-called chronography.

Entry 132 of Hier. vir. ill. reads as follows:¹

1 Hier. vir. ill. 132, ed. E.C. Richardson, *Hieronymus liber De viris inlustribus. Gennadius liber De viris inlustribus. Der sogenannte Sophronius* (Texte und Untersuchungen 14/1; Leipzig, 1896) 55.2-3.

Dexter, Paciani, de quo supra dixi, filius, clarus ad² saeculum et Christi fidei deditus, fertur ad me omnimodam historiam texuisse, quam necdum legi.

Dexter, the son of Pacianus, whom I mentioned earlier, famous in the world and devoted to the faith in Christ, has, I am told, composed an all-encompassing history, which I have not yet read.

Of Spanish stock, Nummius Aemilianus Dexter was the son of Pacianus, bishop of Barcelona,³ but he pursued a secular career, culminating in a stint as *Praefectus praetorio Italiae* in 395.⁴ His Christian credentials, highlighted by Jerome, were probably instrumental in the appointment: the revolt of Eugenius, perceived as favouring paganism, had just been suppressed, and the openly pagan prefect Nicomachus Flavianus had committed suicide in 394.

Dexter is probably best known as the dedicatee of Jerome's *vir. ill.* (392/393).⁵ In the preface to that work, Jerome states that Dexter urged him to provide a Christian equivalent for the survey of famous Latin authors by Suetonius. To display his own learning, Jerome lists a host of earlier Greek and Latin pagan authors who did the same.⁶ Dexter, for his part, appears as someone intent on giving Latin-speaking Christians a Christian past, a task for which Jerome, who had published his chronicle 12 years earlier, was eminently suited. Given Dexter's apparent interest in history, he may have had knowledge of Jerome's chronicle, and it may well have been this knowledge that pushed him to seek contact with Jerome. While there is no evidence for acquaintance between

2 PL 23,715A reads *apud saeculum*, a variant reading not recorded in the apparatus of Richardson, *Hieronymus liber De viris inlustribus. Gennadius liber De viris inlustribus. Der sogenannte Sophronius*, nor in A. Ceresa-Gastaldo, *Gli uomini illustri: de viris illustribus* (Biblioteca patristica 12; Florence, 1988).

3 *Vir. ill.* 106.

4 *PLRE* I, p. 251 (3).

5 On this work, see J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London, 1975) 174-177, expressing the traditional negative judgement. An overview of scholarship is offered by S. Rebenich, *Hieronymus und sein Kreis: Prosopographische und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Historia. Einzelschriften, Heft 72; Stuttgart, 1992) 198 n. 343. For a positive interpretation as a handbook for Christian debate, see C. Whiting, "De Viris Illustribus and New Genres for Christian Disputation in Late Antiquity," in: G. Greatrex & H. Elton (eds.), *Shifting Genres in Late Antiquity* (Farnham, 2015) 41-52. Regarding the date, see the overview of the discussion by Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 174 and S. Rebenich, *Jerome* (The Early Church Fathers; London & New York, 2002) 97.

6 Cf. A. Ceresa-Gastaldo, "Gerolamo e la biografia letteraria cristiana," in: I. Gallo & L. Nicastri (eds.), *Biografia e autobiografia degli antichi e dei moderni* (Naples, 1995) 137-47.

both men preceding Jerome's *vir. ill.*, the only later reference to Dexter in Jerome mentions him again as the dedicatee of *vir. ill.*⁷ In Jerome, then, contact between both men is always related to *vir. ill.*, and it is therefore doubtful if there was closer and more frequent contact.⁸

The entry on Dexter himself appears towards the very end of *vir. ill.*: it is the fourth to last. *Vir. ill.* builds up, with characteristic modesty, towards the last entry on Jerome himself.⁹ Between Dexter and Jerome, we have an entry on Amphilochius of Iconium, who 'recently read' his book *On the Holy Spirit* to Jerome, and one on Sophronius, a close friend of Jerome, who, besides his own production, is said to have translated several works of Jerome into Greek.¹⁰ Dexter is preceded by an entry on Theotimus of Tomi, of whom Jerome has heard that he is writing new treatises, just as he has heard that Dexter has written a history. Whereas Sophronius and Amphilochius are in direct contact with Jerome, then, Dexter and Theotimus are somewhat more distant: the fact that Jerome notes that he has not yet read the history by Dexter is an expression of this.¹¹ This confirms the conclusion that there is no reason to presume too close a relationship between Dexter and Jerome.

7 Hier. *Apologia adversus Rufinum* 2.23 (dated to 395).

8 J. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court, A.D. 364-425* (Oxford, 1975) 133 suggests a visit of Dexter to Bethlehem. M.H. Williams, *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* (Chicago, 2006) 43 suggests it is possible that they may have met in Constantinople in the 380s, but there is no evidence for this. On p. 247 she is more certain ('There he must have met...'). Yet see Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 175, noting that we know nothing about the contacts with Dexter. Rebenich, *Hieronymus und sein Kreis: Prosopographische und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, 214 correctly remarks that there must have been at least epistolary exchange. Ceresa-Gastaldo, *Gli uomini illustri: de viris illustribus*, 340 wrongly states that Dexter dedicated his *omnimoda historia* to Jerome.

9 On Jerome's self-presentation in *vir. ill.*, see C. Borgeais, "La personnalité de Jérôme dans son 'De viris illustribus,'" in: Y.-M. Duval (ed.), *Jérôme entre l'Occident et l'Orient: XVI^e centenaire du départ de saint Jérôme de Rome et de son installation à Bethléem* (Etudes Augustiniennes. Série Antiquité 122; Paris, 1988) 283-293; Rebenich, *Jerome*, 98; A. Cain, *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford & New York, 2009) 3, 13.

10 The Greek version of the *vir. ill.* was wrongly ascribed to him by Erasmus: see Richardson, *Hieronymus liber De viris inlustribus. Gennadius liber De viris inlustribus. Der sogenannte Sophronius*.

11 The church historian Evagrius does something similar: he notes that Agathias has written about the events he is describing, although he has not yet read his work (*Church history* 4.24). See also 5.24, where he remarks that he has not yet read the work of John of Epiphaneia.

Jerome's brief entry on Dexter raises two problems of interpretation.

First, *clarus ad saeculum* is usually translated as 'distinguished in his generation'¹² or 'a man of social distinction'.¹³ But while praise of Dexter can be expected, this translation disregards the chiasmic construction *clarus ad saeculum et Christi fidei deditus*: Dexter is renowned in secular life and, yet, devoted to faith in Christ. *Saeculum* in the sense of 'this-worldly' and profane is rooted in biblical idiom, and the opposition with faith in God and Christ is common, also in Jerome.¹⁴ The translation offered in passing by Rebenich (2002) 94 ("distinguished in secular life") does get the right meaning, but I have preferred the somewhat more literal "famous in the world". By constructing this, as it were, Janus-like portrait of Dexter, famous in secular life yet a pious Christian, Jerome picks up a theme already broached in the preface of *vir. ill.*, where, as we have seen, Dexter also appears as someone rooted in both secular learning and Christianity.

Second, the history written by Dexter is called *omnimoda historia*. This is always translated as universal history,¹⁵ but *omnimodus* can mean either 'universal' (qua coverage) or 'varied' (qua content and form). Titles of this type are known from Greek literature, like the *poikile historia* of Aelianus and the *pantodape historia* of Favorinus. There they indicate the *varied* nature of the subject.¹⁶ The παντοδαπή ἱστορία of Favorinus (2nd century) is once translated as *omnigena historia* by Julius Valerius, the fourth-century author of a Latin Alexander Romance (Favorinus F61 Amato = F24 Mensching). *Omnimoda historia* for *universal* history is unknown in Latin. On the basis of this evidence, the translation 'universal history', with the suggestion that Dexter covered in a systematic narrative the whole of human history, would seem to be a misleading translation.

12 P. Schaff & H. Wace, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Second Series. Vol. 3: Theodoret, Jerome, Gennadius, Rufinus* (Grand Rapids, 1979) 384.

13 T.P. Halton, *Saint Jerome: On Illustrious Men* (The Fathers of the Church 100; Washington, 1999) 165, which is a calque of Ceresa-Gastaldo, *Gli uomini illustri: de viris illustribus*, 229: 'distinto per condizione sociale'.

14 Hier. *epist.* 108.26: *in hoc solo patriae desiderium habuit, ut filium, nurum, neptem renuntiare saeculo Christo seruire cognosceret*. See Blaise *patristique* s.v. *saeculum*.

15 See also R.W. Burgess & M. Kulikowski, *Mosaics of Time: The Latin Chronicle Traditions from the First Century BC to the Sixth Century AD. Vol. I: A Historical Introduction to the Chronicle Genre from Its Origins to the High Middle Ages* (Studies in the Early Middle Ages 33; Turnhout, 2013) 379.

16 For this type of work, and the variety of titles, see the preface of Gell. *Noctes Atticae*.

There is, however, another context in which to understand the title. Jerome's *vir. ill.* offers, in fact, the only occurrences of *omnimoda historia* in Latin.¹⁷ Yet there it is used three times. In the two other instances, it translates one and the same Greek phrase. First, in *De vir. ill.* 81, the list of works of Eusebius of Caesarea, *Chronicorum canonum omnimoda historia et eorum ἐπιτομή* is a somewhat garbled translation of the Greek title of Eusebius' chronicle (χρονικοί κανόνες καὶ ἐπιτομή παντοδαπῆς ἱστορίας Ἑλλήνων τε καὶ βαρβάρων).¹⁸ Whereas in Greek the χρονικοί κανόνες and the ἐπιτομή παντοδαπῆς ἱστορίας indicate the two parts of the work, Jerome has transferred παντοδαπή ἱστορία from *epitome* to *canones*. Likewise in the case of the second occurrence in *vir. ill.* 135, where Jerome designates his own chronicle, a translation and continuation of Eusebius' *canones*, by inverting the genitive construction used for that of Eusebius: *chronicon omnimodae historiae*. Significantly, neither form seems attested in the manuscript tradition of Jerome's chronicle: this usage seems unique for the *vir. ill.* The work is highly dependent on Eusebius for its information, and this clustering of a unique formula inspired by Eusebius in it is probably a result of this.

Within *vir. ill.*, then, *omnimoda historia* translates the Eusebian usage of παντοδαπή ἱστορία. If we interpret the title of Dexter's history in that context, we are entitled to expect a relation with Eusebius' chronicle. Yet, as stated above and indicated in his title, Eusebius' chronicle consisted of two parts. This still leaves us with two options as to the contents of Dexter's history. First, Dexter may have written a chronicle like Jerome's, which translated and continued Eusebius' *canones* or tables, that is, parallel columns with entries.¹⁹ Although this would be consistent with the two other occurrences of *omnimoda historia* in *vir. ill.* described above, it should be noted that Jerome, in all his references to such chronicles in *vir. ill.* as well as in the rest of his oeuvre, makes clear their nature by using terms such as *chronicon*, *temporum liber*, or *chronographia*.²⁰ As this is absent in the case of Dexter, it may be more likely that Dexter translated the other part of Eusebius' chronicle, viz. the ἐπιτομή παντοδαπῆς ἱστορίας

17 *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* IX.2 (1968-1981), 593-4, s.v. *omnimodus*.

18 For the title, which has to be reconstructed from Eus. *Eclogae prophetae* 1; HE 1.1.6, see E. Schwartz, "Eusebios (24)," *RE* 6 (1907) 1376.

19 Burgess & Kulikowski, *Mosaics of Time: The Latin Chronicle Traditions from the First Century BC to the Sixth Century AD. Vol. I: A Historical Introduction to the Chronicle Genre from Its Origins to the High Middle Ages*, 380.

20 See the inventory of Burgess & Kulikowski, *Mosaics of Time: The Latin Chronicle Traditions from the First Century BC to the Sixth Century AD. Vol. I: A Historical Introduction to the Chronicle Genre from Its Origins to the High Middle Ages*, 380-381.

Ἑλλήνων τε καὶ βαρβάρων. This first part of Eusebius' chronicle, often referred to in English as the chronography, was παντοδαπός in the sense that it combined extracts and lists from earlier authors into a universal history. As opposed to authors such as Aelianus or Favorinus, then, in the case of Eusebius, the title παντοδαπή ἱστορία signalled a history that was *both universal* in its coverage, *and varied* through its use of material explicitly drawn from other authors—a combination that could be translated as 'all-encompassing'. This part of Eusebius' chronicle was not translated by Jerome and today only survives partially in an Armenian translation.²¹ Given Jerome's description of Dexter's work as an *omnimoda historia* without further specification in terms of *chronicon*, *temporum liber*, or *chronographia*, Dexter's *omnimoda historia* may thus well be a Latin translation and/or adaptation of the first part of Eusebius' chronicle—the only one, in fact, we know of. An *omnimoda historia* or all-encompassing history in this Eusebian sense fits perfectly with the information on Dexter in the preface of Jerome's *vir. ill.*: not only does it confirm Dexter's interest in bringing a Christian past to the Latin world, but the complementarity, rather than competition, of Dexter's chronographical work with Jerome's can also explain why Dexter may have turned to Jerome with a request for *vir. ill.*, and why Jerome was happy to comply.

Within *vir. ill.*, the entry on Dexter has the literary function of drawing attention, once more, towards the end of the work, to the figure of the dedicatee and confirming his persona as a Christian rooted in classical culture. The fact that Dexter wrote a history himself, confirms the impression of the preface that he is intent on giving a Christian history to Latin-speaking Romans. This literary function, and the fact that Jerome has not yet read the work, may render one suspect of the veracity of this alleged literary activity by Dexter. Indeed, no other trace of Dexter's history has come down to us. This may, however, be pushing scepticism too far: literary function does not preclude the possibility that Dexter did indeed provide a Latin equivalent for Eusebius' Greek ἐπιτομή παντοδαπῆς ἱστορίας Ἑλλήνων τε καὶ βαρβάρων. After all, Jerome seems to suggest that Dexter's work is on his reading list (*necdum legi*).

21 For a translation with commentary, see J. Karst, *Eusebius: Werke. Fünfter Band: Die Chronik* (Leipzig, 1911).