

Martin Wallraff, “Julius Africanus”,
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Julius Africanus

[Sextus]

3rd century. Palestine, Italy. Julius Africanus, the “father of Christian chronography” (GELZER), is the author of the first Christian world chronicle, originally written in Greek. The tradition according to which he bore the praenomen Sextus is late and unreliable (*Suda* A4647). Little is known about his biography. He originated from Palestine (probably Aelia Capitolina, i.e. Jerusalem, *cest.* 5,51), spent some time at the court of king Abgar VIII of Osroene in Edessa, and later lived in Rome (*cest.* 5,53f.). Various journeys in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire are attested (Egypt [F98], Nysa in Caria [*cest.* 5,52], Mount Ararat [F23], the Dead Sea [F26]). He knew several languages, and was acquainted with some of the leading intellectuals of his time (Bardesanes, Origen).

The *Chronographiae* inserts the tradition of Hellenistic universal historiography into a Christian framework. The work starts with the creation and reaches up to the year 221 AD, which was probably also the year in which the chronography was written. Julius counts the years “from Adam”; his main historiographical achievement is the synchronisation of Biblical chronology with Hellenistic systems of dating, especially the Olympiads (F34). His chronological system is not only characterized by a meticulous sense of precision, it also reveals a deep fascination for symbolic numbers. The main features of his system include the Flood in AM 2262, the death of Peleg (in whose time the earth was divided, Gen 10:25) in AM 3000, the first Olympiad in AM 4727, the Incarnation in AM 5500, and the time in which the author himself was writing in AM 5723 = AD 221. It was probably not the author’s intention to make a statement *pro* or *contra* chiliasm, but in the framework of a 6000-year history there would have been doubtless sufficient time to tranquillize any eschatological fear. A long and particularly intricate passage deals with the dating of Jesus’ passion and resurrection in AM 5532 (F93). This fragment represents practically the only surviving part of the history after the incarnation.

This work is not preserved in its entirety, but since it was widely used by later chronographers (it actually formed the basis of the Byzantine era), certain parts of it can be reconstructed on the basis

of their quotations. The most important sources are → Eusebius of Caesarea, → Georgios Synkellos and a fifth or sixth century anonymous Alexandrian chronicle preserved in a Latin translation of low quality (→ *Excerpta Latina Barbari*). The *Chronographiae* was also read and used by Latin and Syriac historians (among others → Sulpicius Severus and → Michael the Great, the Syrian). The preserved fragments boast the only surviving antique list of Olympic victors (F65).

This text like many other fragments was first published by Joseph Justus Scaliger, who inaugurated modern research on the work, in his *Thesaurus temporum* (Leiden, 1606). The first collection of fragments was published by Andrea Gallandi in volume 2 of his *Bibliotheca veterum patrum* (Venice, 1766), reprinted in the *Patrologia Graeca*. In 1815, as a 17-year old student, the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi collected all the material available on Julius Africanus. The 1814 edition by Routh was a major milestone.

Julius’ second main work is entitled *Cesti* (embroideries), a collection of various observations and suggestions in the fields of agriculture, military strategy, geometry etc. Only small parts of this work survive, mostly in later Byzantine collections. It has always puzzled scholars that no trace of the author’s Christian belief can be found in the preserved fragments, although the work must have been written around 230, and thus after the *Chronographiae*. The best explanation for this is that in the multi-religious atmosphere of the intellectual elite in the Severan Age, he was not particularly interested in any sort of rigorous orthodoxy.

Bibliography

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