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CYRUS: A FORGOTTEN POET

Upon seeing or hearing the name Cyrus, most readers will probably think of the famous Persian king, well known from Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* and the prophet Isaiah's enthusiastic message about this king as the one who set the Jewish people free from their exile in Babylon. This article, however, will deal with a Cyrus who lived some thousand years later, *c.*400–70 CE. Cyrus of Panopolis was well known in his day as politician, as (re)builder of Constantinople, as bishop, and as poet. I will first present a short biographical sketch of this remarkable man and thereafter dwell a bit longer upon his poetry.[1]

Flavius Taurus Seleucus Cyrus Hierax, as was his name in full,[2] was born around 400 CE in Panopolis in Egypt, the city from where his famous near-contemporary, Nonnus, also hailed, as well as several other Greek poets.[3] In late antiquity, Panopolis was a city where both pagan and Christian literary culture flourished.[4] Unfortunately, we know next to nothing about Cyrus' early years, but around 439 (perhaps slightly earlier) we see him in high functions and offices[5] at the court of Emperor Theodosius II in Constantinople, where he was the protégé of the Empress Eudocia, who greatly admired his poetry.[6]

[1] The scarce sources for our knowledge of Cyrus' life and work are, aside from his poems, the *Vita* of Daniel the Stylite, some notes in Byzantine chronicles (*Chronicon Paschale*, John Malalas, Theophanes Confessor, etc.), a lemma in the *Suda*, and some decrees in law corpora. The chronicles and the *Suda* draw upon the work of the historian Priscus of Panium (in Thrace), a slightly later contemporary of Cyrus, of whose work only small fragments are extant. The most complete survey of the sources is J. R. Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, vol. II: A.D. 395–527* (Cambridge, 1980), 336–9. For short summaries of the important data, see O. Seeck, 'Flavios Kyros', *RE* 12 (1925), 188–90; G. Dagron, *Naissance d'une capital. Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 à 451* (Paris, 1974), 268–72; M. G. Albiani, 'Kyros aus Panopolis', *Neue Pauly* 6 (1999), 1018; and L. Miguélez Cavero, *Poems in Context. Greek Poetry in the Egyptian Thebaid 200–600 AD* (Berlin and New York, 2008), 29–31.

[2] See Martindale (n. 1), 336–7.

[3] A. Cameron, 'The Empress and the Poet', *YClS* 27 (1982), 217–21; Miguélez Cavero (n. 1), *passim*.

[4] Here one should bear in mind that Nonnus wrote both a lengthy epic on the god Dionysus and a hexametrical paraphrase of the Gospel of John (if, that is, these two poems were indeed written by the same person, which I think is highly probable; see S. Fornaro, 'Nonnos', *Neue Pauly* 8 (2000), 995–8.

[5] For his *cursus honorum*, see the many references in Martindale (n. 1), 337.

[6] *Suda* K 2776. Eudocia was a poet herself: see, e.g., P. van Deun, 'The Poetical Writings of the Empress Eudocia', in J. den Boeft and A. Hilhorst (eds.), *Early Christian Poetry* (Leiden, 1993), 273–82.

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He even attained the rank of *praefectus urbis* of Constantinople, and finally became the praetorian prefect of the East. In both functions he was very successful.[7] After the catastrophic earthquake of the year 437, Cyrus had major parts of Constantinople rebuilt and fortified.[8] He did so in such an impressive way that, on a certain occasion, during an event in the hippodrome, the inhabitants of the city chanted, 'Constantine founded the city but Cyrus renewed it!'[9]

In 441 (not long after his appointment as consul), owing to intrigues in the imperial palace, Cyrus was suddenly discharged from all his functions and stripped of all his possessions, probably on the basis of accusations that he had shown 'sympathy for paganism' (more on this later). Thereafter he was banished to Cotyaeum, a small town in Phrygia, where he took upon himself a compulsory episcopate.[10] It was only after the death of Theodosius II and the intriguers, in 450, that Cyrus returned to Constantinople, where he remained – without high office but highly esteemed by the populace – until his death in *c.*470. In his two final decades he was involved in various forms of charitable work and throughout that time he was in close contact with Daniel the Stylite, who was standing on his pillar on the bank of the Bosporus.[11]

It is not improbable that, in the period before he became an official in the service of Theodosius II, Cyrus belonged to a movement of wandering poets from Egypt (in particular from Panopolis) that was

[7] On some of Cyrus' administrative accomplishments, see A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1964), s.v. Cyrus. For example, Cyrus introduced Latin as the official language of the Roman government alongside Greek, the language spoken by almost everyone in the city, including Cyrus himself; see Lydus, *Mag.* 2.12 (= 3.42).

[8] References in Martindale (n. 1), 338. Among the new buildings was the celebrated church of the Theotokos.

[9] See the references in Dagron (n. 1), 271. A good study is provided by D. J. Constantelos, 'Kyros Panopolites, Rebuilder of Constantinople', *GRBS* 12 (1971), 451–64. Constantelos states: 'Kyros must have been an expert in architecture and a lover of art and beautification, for he erected or rebuilt many churches and public buildings, beautified the capital, installed lanterns along the major city streets, and obliged the merchants and shopkeepers to illuminate their shops' (ibid., 452); he also lists all Byzantine literary sources for the great earthquake (ibid., 452 n. 6). It is the chronicles of John Malalas (361–2) and Theophanes Confessor (AM 5937) that mention the scene in the hippodrome and the chant *Kônstantinos ektise, Kyros aneneôse*.

[10] This almost constituted a death sentence when one bears in mind that the four previous bishops of Cotyaeum (all Nestorians) had been lynched by the local Christian community because of lack of orthodoxy. In some Byzantine sources, Cyrus is said to have been exiled to Smyrna, but that is certainly a mistake. For a slightly different but less probable chronology (according to which Cyrus remained in office as prefect of the city), see K. G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses. Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA, 1982), 190.

[11] See P. W. van der Horst, *Daniël de pilaarheilige* (Zoetermeer-Averbode, 2009), 40–4.

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active from the third century until the sixth.[12] As Bowersock remarks, 'These poets flattered emperors and generals, unearthed or invented traditions about the past that could be useful in the present, and generally offered their services in the cause of politics and diplomacy throughout the Byzantine East.'[13] Most of them were pagans, but there were also Christians among them who had undergone a thorough education in Greek language, literature, and science.[14] In the past, the latter have been held by several modern scholars to have been non-Christians because they took it as self-evident that sympathy for classical culture implied sympathy for paganism – unjustly so. Even a great scholar such as Alan Cameron long held the opinion – on the basis of some fully 'pagan' poems – that Cyrus was not a Christian, but later he retraced his steps.[15] If Cameron's thesis that Cyrus belonged to the 'wandering Egyptian poets' is correct (which some doubt), it is all the more remarkable that he climbed the social ladder all the way up to the highest offices of the empire, and that he was very successful in these offices, both as an administrator and as a master-builder.

With regard to what exactly caused the sudden end of Cyrus' political career, we are still groping in the dark because the sources are not unequivocal and are hard to reconcile. What would seem to be the most probable explanation is that, apart from the problem of Cyrus' 'pagan' poetry, his great popularity among the population of Constantinople evoked jealousy and envy among other high-ranking officials at the court, especially the influential eunuch and chamberlain Chrysaphius, but also in the emperor himself. One should bear in mind that Theodosius was present in the hippodrome when the masses hailed Cyrus on almost equal footing with Constantine the Great. This must have been rather painful, if not humiliating, for the emperor. In order to get rid of him, the fact that he wrote 'pagan' poetry was probably seized upon so as to accuse him of cryptopaganism (he was said to be *hellênophrôn*, 'Greek-minded', i.e. pagan-minded[16]), an accusation that

[12] A. Cameron, 'Wandering Poets: A Literary Movement in Byzantine Egypt', *Historia* 14 (1965), 470–509. Miguélez Cavero (n. 1) is, however, critical of Cameron's thesis.

[13] G. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1990), 62–3.

[14] See the fine chapter 'The Role of Culture and Education in Panopolis', in Miguélez Cavero (n. 1), 191–263.

[15] Cameron (n. 3), 239. Cameron is certainly not the only one to accuse Cyrus of cryptopaganism; see, e.g., J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* (London, 1923), i.229–31.

[16] See the *Suda* Q 145, K 2776; Theophanes, AM 5937; *Chron. Pasch*. s.a. 450; John Malalas 361–2; further Martindale (n. 1), 339. It should be conceded, however, that the accusations of 'paganism' against Cyrus were not necessarily based on his poetry alone.

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looked plausible because most of the Egyptian wandering poets of the preceding few decades had been pagans as well. As Cameron remarks,

> An accusation of paganism in fifth-century Byzantium was much like an accusation of communism in the United States in the 1950s: not easily defined, but evil and sinister beyond definition and (unlike the charge of heresy, another popular weapon) impossible to refute once made.[17]

It is possible that Cyrus was given the opportunity to prove his innocence by having himself appointed as bishop of Cotyaeum, which involved a dangerous exile. But, as I said, it should be borne in mind that the extremely complex interplay of forces and the obscure intrigues at the imperial court are very hard to fathom because the Byzantine sources at our disposal are often either insufficiently informative or contradictory, so one should not expect that certainty about the background and motive(s) of Cyrus' exile is possible.[18]

Let us now shift focus to Cyrus' poems. In the collection of short poems known as the *Anthologia Palatina* we find eight poems attributed to Cyrus, but not all of them are by our poet. Five of them are from the pen of another, later Cyrus (*Anth. Pal.* 7.557, 9.623.808–9.813), so we are left with no more than three that most scholars regard as belonging to Cyrus, namely, *Anth. Pal.* 1.99, 9.136, and 15.9.[19]

To begin with *Anth. Pal.* 1.99, this poem was written by Cyrus in honour of Daniel the Stylite, whom Cyrus admired so much. We are informed about the reason why Cyrus wrote this epigram in the anonymous Greek biography of Daniel. In spite of all the hagiographic elements in this *Vita*, the author often provides us with strikingly reliable historical information, as he does in the present case.[20] He tells us the following story (*Vita Danielis* 31):

> In the meantime there came to the Saint one Cyrus, an exconsul and expretorian prefect. He was a very trustworthy and wise man who had passed through all the ranks owing to

[17] Cameron (n. 3), 269.

[18] The best attempts at reconstruction are Cameron (n. 3), 254–70; and Holum (n. 10), 175–216.

[19] Some scholars conjecture that the *Blemmyomachia* that has been fragmentarily preserved on *P Berol.* 5003 is also from Cyrus' hand (see Miguélez Cavero [n. 1], 59–61), but that seems to me to be very unlikely, since the date of the papyrus (*c.*400 CE) is too early.

[20] On the trustworthiness of this author, see the detailed study by R. Lane Fox, 'The Life of Daniel', in M. J. Edwards and S. Swain (eds.), *Portraits. Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1997), 175–225. The anonymous author wrote this *Vita* at the end of the fifth century, shortly after the death of Daniel and some twenty-five years after that of Cyrus.

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his extreme sagacity. But late in life he suffered from a plot hatched by Chrysaphius,[21] a member of the Emperor's ceremonial bodyguard, and was sent as bishop to a small town, namely to Cotyaeum in Phrygia. Realizing the treachery of Chrysaphius, he yielded so as not to bring his life to a miserable end.[22] After the death of the Emperor Theodosius, he divested himself of his priestly dignity and resumed his secular rank and so continued to the end of his life, for he lived till the reign of Leo of most pious memory.[23] He was accustomed to distribute all his belongings to the poor. This man Cyrus had a daughter called Alexandria who was afflicted by an evil spirit. He had brought her to the holy man Daniel when the latter was still living in the temple at the foot of the hill.[24] Thanks to the intercessions of the archangels and the tears and prayers of the holy man, the Lord freed her from the demon within seven days. Consequently, from that time onwards the two men had a passionate affection for each other.[25]

Hereafter we are told that some years later (*c.*462), after Daniel had moved from his seclusion in a temple to his new life on a pillar, Cyrus again appealed to Daniel with a child who was being tormented by a demon, this time his eldest daughter. On this occasion, Cyrus was unpleasantly surprised to discover that Daniel had given permission to Gelanius, another high court official, to erect a high pillar for him. Cyrus was of the opinion that it was not Gelanius but rather he himself who was the right person for that task – apparently he wanted to present himself before the general public of Constantinople as a Christian patron. After Daniel's tactful explanation, however, he reconciled himself with the situation, but asked whether the saint would agree to him at least inscribing an epigram on the pillar.[26] Although Daniel initially raised a protest because he was against any form of glorification of a human being, he finally permitted Cyrus to do so. The result was a short epigram of six lines in three disticha (*Vit. Dan.* 36 = *Anth. Pal.* 1.99):[27]

[21] Chrysaphius was a very powerful eunuch and chamberlain at the court of Theodosius II. The emperor's successor, Marcianus, had Chrysaphius decapitated immediately after assuming power. The plotting of Chrysaphius against Cyrus took place during the reign of Theodosius II, several years before Cyrus' first meeting with Daniel. On Chrysaphius, see Holum (n. 10), 191 n. 74.

[22] Cyrus feared being murdered by Chrysaphius.

[23] Leo I was emperor from 457 to 474.

[24] This remark refers back to a period before Daniel had mounted his pillar but when he had locked himself up for several years in a deserted pagan temple from which he had exorcized the 'demons' (*Vit. Dan.* 14–20).

[25] Greek text in H. Delehaye, *Les saints stylites* (Brussels, 1923); English translation in E. Dawes and N. H. Baynes, *Three Byzantine Saints* (Oxford, 1948); my own (Dutch) translation in van der Horst (n. 11).

[26] Lane Fox (n. 20), 178, coined the term 'pillargram' for this type of epigram.

[27] Translation by Dawes and Baynes (n. 25). On this poem see H. Delehaye, 'Une épigramme de l'Anthologie Grecque (I, 99)', *REG* 9 (1896) 216–24, where full philological details are given.

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Standing twixt earth and heaven a man you see
Who fears no gales that all about him fret.[28]
Daniel's his name, great Simeon's rival he.[29]
Upon a double column firm his feet are set.[30]
Ambrosial hunger, bloodless thirst support his frame.[31]
And thus the Virgin Mother's Son he doth proclaim.[32]

The text of this short poem as it has been preserved in the manuscripts of the *Vita Danielis* differs from that in the manuscripts of the *Anthologia Palatina*. This is not surprising in view of the widely differing *Überlieferungsgeschichte* of these two documents or corpora, but for our present purpose the deviations are not substantial enough for us to go into the details.[33] What is most important to note here is that neither the contents of the poem nor the setting in the story of the *Vita Danielis* offers any room for doubt that the poem is a product of a Christian author, in spite of its Homeric diction.[34] That does not apply, however, to the other two poems.

Let us first look at *Anth. Pal.* 15.9, because that, too, is a poem wherein Cyrus sings the praises of a person whom he holds in high esteem, this time Emperor Theodosius II:

All the renowned deeds of the Aiacid are thine,
Except his secret love. Thou drawest the bow like Teucer,
But art no bastard. Thou hast the illustrious beauty
Of Agamemnon, but wine does not disturb thy mind.
In prudence I liken thee in every way to Odysseus,
But thine is without evil fraud. O king, thou dost distil
Honeyed words like those of the old man of Pylos,
Before thou seest time touching the third generation.[35]

What we see here is an out-and-out Homeric poem, both in metre and in vocabulary and imagery; and only Homeric personalities are

[28] For the heavy storms, see *Vit. Dan.* 47 and 52.
[29] Simeon the Stylite (*c.*390–459) was Daniel's great inspiration.
[30] On this curious double pillar, see *Vit. Dan.* 44.
[31] With this somewhat curious phrase Cyrus indicates that Daniel's hunger and thirst are not for earthly fare that would give him physical satisfaction (so not for meat or wine) but for heavenly fare, because he is striving to live like an angel (heavenly beings have no blood, hence 'bloodless').
[32] The son of the virgin (*apeirogamos*) mother is, of course, Jesus Christ.
[33] The most important textual variant is that almost all manuscripts of the *Vita Danielis* have the following order of the verses (deviating from that in *Anth. Pal.*): 1, 2, 5, 4, 3, 6.
[34] Compare, for example, v. 1 with. Homer, *Il.* 5.769, 22.318; etc.
[35] That is to say, before grandchildren were born. This implies that Cyrus wrote this poem before 438, the year in which Theodosius' first grandchild was born. Translation from the Loeb edition by W. H. Paton (with modifications).

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mentioned here. There is a vast difference from the Christian *disticha* for Daniel. Even though Theodosius himself was a Christian, in this poem he is praised as the equivalent of the great Homeric heroes (Achilles, Teucros, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Nestor), but without their vices. In short, it is a fully pagan encomium, but with a corrective twist.[36]

Finally, there is *Anth. Pal.* 9.136, probably written by Cyrus when he was exiled from Constantinople to Phrygian Cotyaeum owing to the intrigues of Chrysaphius, Theodosius' influential chamberlain (see *Vit. Dan.* 31):

> Would that my father had taught me to shepherd fleecy flocks
> So that, sitting under elms or piping under a rock
> I might cheer my sorrows with music of the flute.
> O Muses, let us fly from this well-made city
> And seek another home. But I will announce to all
> That pestilent drones have done mischief to the bees.[37]

One surmises a certain irony when Cyrus, being forced to leave his 'well-made city' (i.e. well made by himself),[38] sighs that his father should have taught him to pasture sheep, if one realizes that he now has a dangerous episcopate with a very unruly flock forced upon him. And in the last line comes the *venenum in cauda*: with the ever-busy bees Cyrus of course refers to himself, whereas his opponents – the eunuch Chrysaphius and his fellow-plotters – are pestilent drones. Be that as it may, here we have pastoral imagery (although no bucolic style),[39] but again we do not find the slightest trace of the fact that the author is a Christian, let alone a bishop-to-be. If we did not have Cyrus' epigram for Daniel and his Christmas sermon (on which see below), one could think that Theodosius had appointed a pagan to the episcopal see in Cotyaeum in 441. Cyrus is, just like Synesius, bishop of Cyrene, a generation earlier, a *Christian* Hellenist who is completely

[36] See T. Viljamaa, *Studies in Greek Encomiastic Poetry of the Early Byzantine Period* (Helsinki, 1968), 115–16. Viljamaa points out the frequent use of 'favourable comparisons' in the encomiastic poetry of that time. For the language of imperial praise in fifth- and sixth-century Byzantium, see also M. Whitby, 'The Vocabulary of Praise in Verse Celebration of Sixth-century Building Achievements: *AP* 2.398–406, *AP* 9.656, *AP* 1.10 and Paul the Silentiary's *Description of St Sophia*', in D. Accorinti and P. Chuvin (eds.), *Des Géants à Dionysos. Mélanges de mythologie et de poésie grecques offerts à Francis Vian* (Alexandria, 2003), 593–606.

[37] Translation by Paton (modified).

[38] Cameron (n. 3), 235: 'We can hardly doubt that Cyrus' purpose was to evoke his own very substantial contributions to the beautification and fortification of that particular city.'

[39] Miguélez Cavero (n. 1), 169, calls it a 'bucolic threnody'.

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oriented towards Greek culture.[40] The intense devotion of the pillar saint touched him very deeply, but that did not detract from his equally profound admiration for Homer and the other great classical authors. For Cyrus, there was no Christianity without Hellenism: 'It was perfectly possible for a man to live in both worlds at once without discomfort.'[41] That his Hellenic soul was a Christian one also becomes very clear from the first sermon that he gave as newly appointed bishop in Phrygian exile, on Christmas Day of the year 441.

This Christmas homily is definitely a highly unusual one because it is almost certainly the shortest Christmas sermon in history – it did not last longer than half a minute. The text has been handed down in slightly divergent forms,[42] but the relevant phrases are almost identical in these versions:

> Brethren and sisters, let us honour the birth of our God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, in silence because the Word of God was conceived in the Holy Virgin through listening alone.[43] To Him be the glory for ever and ever, Amen.

These were the first words that Cyrus spoke in the presence of the utterly suspicious members of the Christian community in Cotyaeum, who had undoubtedly heard the rumours that their new bishop stood under the suspicion of pagan sympathies (or heresy). Even the slightest confirmation of this suspicion would imply that they would have killed him, as they did four of his (Nestorian) predecessors. For that reason Cyrus initially did not want to speak to them, but when he finally did, under due pressure, it was this utterly brief, but orthodox, sermon that saved his life. His parishioners reacted enthusiastically to it and praised him for it (*euphêmêsan auton*[44]). However briefly, Cyrus did make clear that the divinity of Christ, the Incarnation, and the honour of the Holy Virgin were very important for him. The last of these

[40] On Synesius' connections with Egyptian 'wandering poets', see D. T. Runia, 'Another Wandering Poet', *Historia* 28 (1979), 254–6.

[41] Cameron (n. 3), 246; see also Miguélez Cavero (n. 1), 101.

[42] T. E. Gregory, 'The Remarkable Christmas Homily of Kyros Panopolites', *GRBS* 16 (1975), 317–24, esp. 318.

[43] Cyrus here uses the word *akoê*, which is polysemic. Apart from 'listening', it can also mean 'obeying', and it could even be a veiled reference to the theory that the Jesus was conceived of the Virgin Mary via her 'ear' (also a meaning of *akoê*), but the latter would not be very relevant in the historical context in which these words were spoken. The emphasis is here obviously on listening *in silence*. Cyrus probably derived the motif of Mary's conception of Jesus *di' akoês* from Proclus, Archbishop of Constantinople (437–47), who had used the same motif in his homilies on the Incarnation in previous years. It is likely that Cyrus had heard these sermons in Constantinople. See Cameron (n. 3), 244.

[44] John Malalas, *Chron.* 14; Theophanes, *Chron*. AM 5937.

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elements was a particularly weighty matter in a period during which devotion to the Virgin Mary had become an ever more important aspect of the Christian faith (this devotion is also apparent in the final line of Cyrus' pillargram for Daniel the Stylite).[45] Furthermore, it is probable that the Christians in Cotyaeum appreciated the fact that Cyrus kept well away from the theological subtleties that had caused so much tension and strife in the churches of the East in the fourth and fifth centuries. The rumours that he was a pagan Hellenist were swept from the table in less than a minute.

Because most of Cyrus' poetry has not been preserved and we do not have any of the poems that he may have written in the nine years of his Phrygian episcopacy, it is unfortunately impossible to ascertain whether or not he continued writing Homeric poems and other 'pagan' poetry, but I very much doubt it. What is indubitable, however, is that Cyrus always remained a Hellenist, heart and soul. In the final analysis he, like bishop Synesius, was a Christian humanist.[46]

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[45] According to B. Baldwin, 'Cyrus of Panopolis: A Remarkable Sermon and an Unremarkable Poem', *Vigiliae Christianae* 36 (1982), 169–72, this very short sermon is probably a manifestation of 'a pagan's desire to show Christian writers how to do it' (172 n. 13), and the epigram on Daniel's pillar is 'more concerned with poetry than with piety' (170). Baldwin still regards Cyrus as a cryptopaganist and does not take his Christian texts seriously; moreover, he completely disregards Cyrus' attitude towards Daniel. To assume that Cyrus was a man of this kind of opportunistic cynicism is irrational and unwarranted (see what follows in the main text).

[46] The attribution of the *Passion of Saint Menas* to Cyrus by P. Peeters, *Le tréfonds oriental de l'hagiographie byzantine* (Brussels, 1950), 32–3 (followed by Cameron [n. 3], 245), is too speculative to be taken into account here.

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