

ISIDORUS OF PELUSIUM, SAINT

A fifth-century monk, priest, and scholar, who wrote a large number of letters on church affairs (PG 78). Trustworthy documents informing us of the life of Isidorus are relatively few. [SEVERUS OF ANTIOCH](#), exiled to Egypt from 518 to 520, was led to inquire there as to the identity of the man from Pelusium and possessed a letter from an ascetic that had the following comment: “greetings from the venerable priest Isidorus, an altar of Christ and vessel of the ministry in the Churches, a treasury of the Scriptures, the father of words (writer), a cistern of virtues and a temple of peace” (*Contra impium Grammaticum* 3. 39, CSCO 102, p. 182). For Severus, who quotes some of Isidorus’ letters, the latter was a priest at Pelusium in the time of the bishops [CYRIL I](#) of Alexandria, Eusebius of Pelusium, and Hermogenes of Rhinokorua.

The few references accompanying the Christological anthologies or florilegia that are quoted in the sixth century by Ephraem, Leontius of Byzantium, Facundus of Hermiana, Pelagius, Rusticus, and Stephanus Gobar merely indicate that this priest of Pelusium (called also “abbas” by Rusticus) blamed Theophilus and Cyril on account of their hostility toward JOHN CHRYSOSTOM. EVAGRIUS the Scholastic (*Ecclesiastical History* 1.15) recalls that Isidorus, who was renowned for his ascetic monastic life and for his writings, lived in the time of THEODOSIUS II and Cyril.

The hagiographical accounts vary perceptibly among themselves. According to the oldest Life, Isidorus, after being trained in the Scriptures and in [Greek](#) studies, is said to have been a monk at Nitria and then to have been ordained a priest by Athanasius, before banishment at the hands of Theophilus and returning to the desert from which he exhorted his contemporaries by his letters. The recent Lives often confuse him with Isidorus of Alexandria, and would have it that he was an Origenist refugee with John Chrysostom. According to the Alexandrian Synaxarion (CSCO 78, p. 489) and the Arabic Jacobite Synaxarion (Coptic

version: PO 56, p.814), Isidorus of al-Farama or Pelusium (feast day: 10 Amshr) was a relative of Theophilus and Cyril; to avoid becoming “patriarch” of Alexandria, he fled as far as Pelusium, where he became a monk.

Reading the Isidorus corpus and studying the correspondence provide us initially with some useful markers. The oldest are surely a letter to GREGORY OF NYSSA (no. 125) and, perhaps, another to Evagrius (no. 251). Though he had not heard Chrysostom, as has been believed, he was an admirer of the latter and was able to tell the story of his tragedy (no. 152). He knew Ammonius, bishop of Pelusium, and condemned the exactions of his successor, Eusebius. In two “civil” cases, Isidorus called into question two iniquitous *correctores* (governors of the province of [Augustamnica](#) prima, at Pelusium), Cyrenius and Gigantius. He addressed his complaints to high imperial functionaries, whose names have come down in history (Florentius, Synesios, Isidorus, Seleucus). In particular this was true of Rufinus, prefect of the praetorium at Constantinople in 431-432 (to be distinguished from the Rufinus assassinated in 395). Several of Isidorus’ letters relate to preparations for the COUNCIL OF EPHESUS (431) and its aftermath. Also when we compare the names of the bishops who corresponded with the Pelusiot and the lists of the bishops who were signatories at the Council of Ephesus, the “Robber” Council of Ephesus (449), and then the COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON (451), we can see that most of those who were bishops in Augustamnica prima around 431 received letters from Isidorus.

On these assured foundations, and taking into account various indications scattered about the correspondence, it is possible to retrace Isidorus’ itinerary (though with a degree of uncertainty). Born around 355 in the region of Pelusium, his initial studies were undergone by him in that city. He pursued his education at Alexandria, where he was perhaps together with Synesios, a [disciple](#) of Hypatia, the female philosopher. Returning to Pelusium, Isidorus pursued the profession of master of rhetoric and sophistry. Then this expert in the art of speech embraced silence by

choice, and retired to the desert of Nitria where he investigated scripture, drawing on the knowledge of the Cappadocian masters. Coming back to Pelusium he was ordained as a priest (doubtless by Ammonius) and fulfilled the duties of a *didaskalos*—expounding and commenting on the sacred texts. But when around 408 Eusebius succeeded Bishop Ammonius, Isidorus could not abide the way in which the Word he taught was out of gear with the disorders that were increasing in the church at Pelusium. So once again he chose the desert and withdrew into a monastery of the cenobitic or semi-anchorite type, some distance to the east of Pelusium (perhaps near Aphnaion). From that spot he wrote the majority of the letters that have come down to us; and it was there that he was visited by a number of his former [disciples](#) who were attracted by his eloquence, his knowledge of scripture, and his experience of the monastic life. There, too, he died at a very old age, about 435-440.

The works of Isidorus of Pelusium have come down to us in the form of a corpus of letters numbering some 2,000 items. [Severus](#) of Antioch counted nearly 3,000 letters distributed through several books, but noted that in a single book some letters had been copied twice or thrice and the original numerical order had no longer been followed. After successive editions, it has been possible to reconstitute a numbered collection of 2,000 [items](#) that has every chance of being very old, if not original.

It was long thought that Isidorus had also composed three treatises, and that there existed certain unpublished letters. Actually these three treatises constitute an integral part of the corpus. They are a little treatise on the nonexistence of destiny (no. 954), a treatise against the Greeks (no. 1470), and a eulogy of virtue (no. 646). As to the [items](#) claimed in the past to have been unpublished, tests show that either they are in the corpus or are not by Isidorus.

Questions are often raised on the authenticity and the form of these letters. Many of them lack the customary introductions or conclusions;

others are split into several fragments; others again are quotations or paraphrases from classical or patristic works. We may suspect that some were school exercises addressed to fictitious correspondents. Nevertheless, the consistency of the prosopography, both geographical and historical, argues in favor of the authenticity of these letters. All the correspondents (and their titles and occupations) are [contemporary](#) with Isidorus. (There are more than 420, among whom 104 belong to the authorities, 34 to the township of Pelusium, 171 to the church, 64 to the monastic scene, and for the most part they lived in the region of Pelusium or elsewhere in Egypt).

The gaps or defects in the corpus are certainly attributable to those who compiled it shortly after the death of the Pelusiot. These compilers were very probably monks from the region of Pelusium (Peter the archimandrite, and the monks Nilus, Paul, Orion, Quintianus, etc.) who around 440-450 collected the “letters” of Isidorus and numbered them without much discernment. Very soon this collection, or selections (florilegia) derived from it, spread throughout the Eastern empire. Thus it was that from the second half of the fifth century Isidorian extracts appear in the first collection of apothegms of Palestinian origin.

The correspondence of Isidorus mirrors an era. This monk, who lived in isolation from the world, remained interested in all the problems confronting the men of his day. As was the wish of John Chrysostom, he had a sense of solidarity with those Christians who remained “in the world.” Hence he intervenes to expound and comment and exhort, to encourage, to admonish, to censure or to threaten. With an untrammelled freedom of speech, here was one who could condemn the injustices of governors or judges and the exactions of the soldiery, or urge bishops and clergy to lead a life more in accordance with the Gospel or, simply, to be more moral. His varied experience permitted him both to advise in matters pertaining to education or to rhetoric, and to explain with precision difficult passages of scripture or liturgical usages, and to throw light on the narrow way of the ascetic life. Himself a priest, he reminded

other members of the clergy (particularly around Pelusium) of the duties of the church's ministry, and urged the faithful to respect the priesthood.

If the reputation of Isidorus is primarily that of a moralist (doubtless because of the large number of letters addressed to a group of simoniacal and depraved clergy—Eusebius, Zosimus, Maro, Martinianos, Chaeremon, Eustathius) he merits our interest and admiration on other scores. For a start, this fine rhetorician writes an admirable Greek (he was later held up as a model alongside GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, BASIL THE GREAT, and LIBANIUS). He was an excellent exegete, nourished on the reading of John Chrysostom, and was constantly expounding and commenting on the Old and New Testaments, most frequently in reply to questions that had been raised on passages of a ticklish nature. If his predilection was for allegorical commentaries, he nevertheless often rested content with a literal explanation (his philological knowledge was a help to him here) that his correspondents could grasp. The exegetical catenae in which his remarks frequently appear indicate the greatness of his fame in this field.

The numerous pieces of advice pertaining to [asceticism](#) that he lavished on his [disciples](#) make him a source of knowledge for a type of ascetic life in which influences from Egypt and from Cappadocia were mingled. The semi-anchoritic Egyptian tendency, in which the role of the spiritual master is conspicuous, is linked with a cenobitism of Basilian type, the rules of which are well-known (no. 1). Scripture is not just to be “digested” and memorized, but is also the starting point for a form of contemplation that is linked with a “practice.” Following John Chrysostom's advice, Isidorus, though separated from the world, remained available to it, and contributed by his example and by his interventions to the purification and edification of the church.

In the sixth century the Monophysites and the [Chalcedonians](#) made certain of the “Christological” letters of Isidorus their own as evidence on their behalf (nos. 23, 303, 323, 405). A. Schmid has shown what [interpolations](#) this involved. But was the Pelusiot a theologian? We can

say yes, to the extent that in the struggle against the Arians, Eunomians, Sabellians, and others he showed his faithfulness to Nicaea and to Athanasius in so far as he defended the unity of Christ and rejected any change or admixture in the Incarnation at the time of the Council of Ephesus (431) and the Act of Union (433). He certainly did not take part in the Eutychian controversy, but a formula such as “the divinity and the humanity in Christ have become a single ‘prosopon,’ a single hypostasis, the object of adoration” (no. 360) is not without an intimation of the [Chalcedonian](#) formula.

Isidorus, however, was not a theologian in the technical sense. For him, God was not the object of discourse but of contemplation.

In retirement into the desert and in meditation on scripture Isidorus the sophist gave up games of rhetoric so that he could enter into the silence of the divine Word.

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