

A parchment fragment of Agrippa Castor “Against Basilides”?

Posted on [September 29, 2016](#) by [Roger Pearse](#)

A correspondent writes to tell me that there is a 5th century parchment item in the Bodleian Library in Oxford – a fragment from Egypt, of course – listed in the catalogue [here](#), which the cataloguer attributes to Agrippa Castor:

Shelfmark: MS. Gr. th. g. 3 (P)

Summary Catalogue no: 31812

Summary of contents: Theological controversy with B (? part of Agrippa Castor’s lost refutation of Basileides).

Language: Greek

Origin: Egyptian

Date: 5th century (?)

Material: parchment

This is very interesting, and I could wish that the parchment was online.

Agrippa Castor wrote around 135 AD against the 24 books of the gnostic Basilides. Unfortunately all his work is lost, and we know about him only from Eusebius (HE IV, [c.7](#)), Jerome (De Viris Illustribus c. 21), and Theodoret (*Haeticarum Fabularum Compendium* I, c.4, PG 349C). The Eusebius is as follows:

5. But as there were at that time a great many members of the Church who were fighting for the truth and defending apostolic and ecclesiastical doctrine with uncommon eloquence, so there were some also that furnished posterity through their writings with means of defense against the heresies to which we have referred.

6. Of these there has come down to us a most powerful refutation of Basilides by Agrippa Castor, one of the most renowned writers of that day, which shows the terrible imposture of the man.

7. While exposing his mysteries he says that Basilides wrote twenty-four books upon the Gospel, and that he invented prophets for himself named Barcabbas and Barcoph, and others that had no existence, and that he gave them barbarous names in order to amaze those who marvel at such things; that he taught also that the eating of meat offered to idols and the unguarded renunciation of the faith in times of persecution were matters of indifference; and that he enjoined upon his followers, like Pythagoras, a silence of five years.

8. Other similar things the above-mentioned writer has recorded concerning Basilides, and has ably exposed the error of his heresy.

Jerome writes as follows:

Agrippa surnamed Castor, a man of great learning, wrote a strong refutation of the twenty-four volumes which Basilides the heretic had written against the Gospel, disclosing all his mysteries and enumerating the prophets Barcabbas and Barchob and all the other barbarous names which terrify the hearers, and his most high God Abraxas. whose name was supposed to contain the year according to the reckoning of the Greeks. Basilides died at Alexandria in the reign of Hadrian, and from him the Gnostic sects arose. In this tempestuous time also, Cochebas leader of the Jewish faction put Christians to death with various tortures.

Theodoret writes:

And Basilides also had prophets, Barcabas and Barcoph and some others equally barbarian. And he formed other most abominable myths from these which I have not included because of the damage to those who will happen upon them.

And Isidore, the son of Basilides, with a certain addition, strengthened the mythology of [his] father. And Agrippa, surnamed Castor, Irenaeus, Clement's Stromata and Origen struggled against these, while contending for the truth.^[1]

Catalogues of fragments are not a reliable guide to the contents. No doubt the fragment utters some anti-gnostic sentiments, perhaps mentions Basilides; and it would be most interesting to see it!