CHAPTER 18

The Treatment of Ecumenical Councils in Byzantine Chronicles

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The western branches of the orthodox church acknowledge seven councils or synods as being ecumenical and recognise each of them by their location and also by their ordinal numeral and by the number of bishops attending. So Nicaea I (325) is referred to as the First ecumenical council of 318 bishops; Constantinople I (381) as the Second of 150 bishops; Ephesus I (431) the Third of 240 bishops; Chalcedon (451) the Fourth of 630 bishops; Constantinople II (553) the Fifth of 265 bishops; Constantinople III (7 November 680–16 September 681) the Sixth of 289 bishops; and Nicaea II (787) as the Seventh and final ecumenical council of 350 bishops. There is also at least partial acceptance of the council in Trullo as ecumenical (sometime between the end of 691 and 1 September 692), named from its location in the Constantinopolitan palace of that name but otherwise known as the Quinisextum or Penthekte, which considered itself to be ecumenical from being convened by Justinian II to complete the work of the Fifth and Sixth councils, while Ephesus II (8–22 August 449) was also convened as ecumenical but was almost immediately rejected as such, being known rather as the Robber council (Latrocinium), the term invented for it by Pope Leo I. It is these seven that define correct belief and proper governance of the church, so their decisions, together with those of the Latrocinium and in Trullo, were highly influential in ecclesiastical matters which in turn made them significant also in Byzantine secular history.

Although the councils are overlooked in classicising histories such as Procopius and Agathias as unsuitable material for that genre with its emphasis on secular history and avoidance of Christian terminology, we have, in addition to good documentary records for most of the councils, solid accounts of the first five in near-contemporary ecclesiastical histories: Eusebius for Nicaea I; the mid-fifth-century church historians Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret for Constantinople I and Ephesus I; and the late sixth-century Evagrius for the Latrocinium, Chalcedon, and Constantinople II. There are, however, no further ecclesiastical historians after Evagrius until Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos in the fourteenth century, so no ecclesiastical historian records the Sixth, Seventh, or the in Trullo councils. Simply the disappearance of that genre for
such a long period is also enough to suggest that the Byzantine reading and lis-
tening public, small though it was, not only could not turn to that genre for any
account of the Sixth and Seventh councils but is also unlikely to have turned
to it for whatever knowledge it may have had about the earlier councils either.
With a gap too of secular classicising history between Theophylact Simocatta
in the early seventh century and Psellus in the eleventh, any knowledge of
the past, both secular and ecclesiastic, was necessarily gained mainly, if not
entirely, from Byzantine universal chronicles. This genre, though it too had its
own interruptions, overcame them to a great degree by later chroniclers copy-
ing almost verbatim much of a predecessor’s work, with each chronicle narrat-
ing events from creation up to the author’s own lifetime.

The Byzantine universal chronicles each record all the councils that had
occurred up to the author’s lifetime, with the only exceptions being the sixth-
century Malalas, who records the first four councils but omits the Fifth; and
the twelfth-century Manasses, who omits the lot in a verse chronicle with an
emphasis on good stories that also ignores almost everything else to do with
ecclesiastical events, perhaps regarding them as unsuitable for his patron, the
sebastocratorissa Eirene. So the chronicles did at least provide a record of the
ecumenical councils, and it is probably the record by which most Byzantines
knew whatever they did know about them, whether directly or indirectly.
Despite this, two points need noting: first, that the chronicles tell us nothing
that we do not know better from other sources (with the single exception of
George the Monk’s record of the Fifth council); and second, each of the chron-
icles makes different use of the councils for its narrative of the past. It is, how-
ever, the differences in their presentation that may reveal either the changing
significance of the ecumenical councils in Byzantine history and society or the
literary development of the genre.

The literary treatment of Byzantine chronicles remains in its infancy. The
aim of this chapter is to examine how the various universal chronicles treat
the ecumenical councils. Although this does not reveal anything about the
ecclesiastical decisions themselves, it helps to draw attention to changing
attitudes to the past and the use that was made of that past. We shall look
at nine chronicles: Malalas (sixth century), Chronicon Paschale (seventh cen-
tury), Theophanes (early ninth century), George the Monk (late ninth century),
Symeon Logothete (mid-tenth century), pseudo-Symeon (late tenth century),
Psellus’ Historia syntomos (eleventh century), Kedrenos (eleventh to twelfth
centuries), and Zonaras (twelfth century). We necessarily ignore the many
local councils such as those discussed in Synodicon uetus, probably to be dated
between 867 and 920, which claims to record some 166 councils, though some
of the 166 are certainly the author’s own invention.