CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CHURCH HISTORIANS (I):
SOCRATES, SOZOMENUS, AND THEODORETUS*

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I Introduction

The reign of Theodosius II (408–450) was an age of cultural ascendency. The classical tradition was still vibrant, but Christian influence showed its mark, too. Poetry blossomed, continuing older motives and forms but also dealing with Christian themes; the Codex Theodosianus was drawn up, assembling the tradition of imperial legislation. Classicising historiography found a worthy continuator in Olympiodorus; ecclesiastical historiography was as productive as never before. No less than four Church historians are known from this age: Philostorgius, Socrates, Sozomenus, and Theodoretus. The works by three of them are completely or nearly completely preserved, Philostorgius’ work can be reconstructed from numerous fragments in its main outlines. Apart from these a so-called Christian history was written by Philippus of Side, which was certainly more directly related to the Church histories than to pagan historiography.

There are many striking resemblances between the Church histories of Socrates, Sozomenus and Theodoretus: all three of them claim to continue Eusebius’ Church history; all three of them are built around the reigns of Roman emperors; and their judgements on individual emperors are all very similar. For Cassiodorus (Epiphanius) and Theodorus Anagnostes those similarities were so evident that they wrote Church histories, which assembled passages from those three authors, so-called *historiae tripartitae*. Therefore, the label “synoptical Church historians” has been adopted in the language of modern

* Many thanks to John Drinkwater for his help.
1 This Herculean task has been achieved by J. Bidez and F. Winkelmann (Berlin, 1981).
research to describe the work of Socrates, Sozomenus, and Theodoretus. More recent studies have, however, highlighted the differences between them,\(^2\) which will also be underlined in this contribution. Therefore the term “synoptical”, which is sometimes useful, is written in inverted commas here.

Nevertheless, the question remains as to how the cluster of Church histories in the reign of Theodosius II is to be explained. The phenomenon seems to be a symptom of the consolidation of Christian faith in Roman state and society. On the other hand, the necessity of defending the orthodox interpretation of history against heretical concepts, which retained a certain allure for many, was without doubt widely felt.\(^3\)

One thing is clear: paganism is not the main target of the polemics of these historians. Although they like to write triumphalist accounts of the destruction of pagan sanctuaries, the victory over the pagans is generally taken for granted. The main enemy is heterodoxy, especially homeanism, and all those confessions that are labelled as Arian in the Athanasian tradition. This observation makes the Church history of Philostorgius, not to be dealt with here, the more valuable, because he was an adherent of Eunomius, and thus, in the eyes of his “colleagues”, an Arian. In any case, the Church histories of the Theodosian age give a colourful impression of the plurality of theological and political (not only in terms of Church policy) concepts of this age.\(^4\)

II  The Authors

1. Lives

A. Socrates

Socrates is known only from his own writings.\(^5\) He was a native of Constantinople, where he grew up and wrote his Church history.


\(^3\) See Marasco in this volume.

\(^4\) All translations are based on the respective NPNF-volumes.

\(^5\) For his life see Leppin, op. cit., 10ff.; see T. Urbainczyk, Socrates of Constantinople,