CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE CHURCH HISTORIANS AND CHALCEDON

Michael Whitby

Introduction

The Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in 451 was an event of fundamental importance for the definition of Christian doctrine and organization of the Church, including the question of its relations with secular authorities. If it ranks behind the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea (325 A.D.), in some ways the consequences of Chalcedon for the development of the Church were as momentous.¹ Chalcedon confirmed that the Nestorians would not belong to the true Church of the Eastern Roman Empire, and so contributed to their withdrawal into Persia shortly thereafter; in exile Nestorian missionaries energetically propagated their faith, sending missionaries eastwards to India and along the silk route to China. Chalcedon also constituted the key division for Christians within the Roman Empire. Bits of the Eastern Empire never accepted the orthodoxy of Chalcedon, partly because it did not appear to exclude the threat posed to the unity of Christ by the ideas of Nestorius, partly because the distinctive Christological language of the greatest eastern theologian, Cyril of Alexandria, seemed to have been compromised through accommodation to the views of Pope Leo; the Council had also legitimated certain prominent supporters of Nestorian views who had been hostile to Cyril of Alexandria, and anathematized key opponents. This perception might be a gross simplification, but it came to be the preferred version of events especially in the Empire’s eastern provinces where Coptic, Syriac or Armenian, rather than Greek, were the languages of debate: translation inevitably helped

¹ For Nicaea and Chalcedon as twin peaks in the development of Christian doctrine, see F.M. Young, From Nicaea to Chalcedon, a guide to the literature and its background (London, 1983); and for the importance of Chalcedon, A. Grillmeier and H. Bacht, Das Konzil von Chalkedon, Geschichte und Gegenwart I–II (Wurzburg, 1951–53).
to consolidate misconceptions about the opinions of participants and to thwart rational persuasion. Chalcedon also drove a wedge between eastern and western Mediterranean, partly because of rivalry between Rome and Constantinople, whose pretensions to eastern primacy had been endorsed at the Council, partly because the Eastern Empire was thereafter faced by a clash of priorities which could not be reconciled: unity in the east entailed the abandonment of key aspects of Chalcedon, and, as it turned out, formal condemnation of the Council; good relations between Constantinople and Rome required adherence to the Chalcedonian doctrinal definition as enshrined in the Tome of Pope Leo, which represented papal claims to doctrinal leadership of the universal Church. Chalcedon established a cycle of east-west suspicion and hostility which persisted throughout the next millennium of Roman imperial history.²

These wide-ranging responses to Chalcedon were shaped by the different perceptions of the Council enshrined in the historiographical tradition. It is the purpose of this chapter to investigate how these perceptions were constructed and sustained through identification of key figures as heroes or bogeymen, selective reporting of the Council’s decisions, and critical assessment of those men of power, mostly emperors and patriarchs, who had to come to terms with the problem of the Council. We have the materials to identify how the three main strands of opinion within the Empire, Monophysites, imperial Chalcedonians in the east, and papal Chalcedonians in the west came to define the inheritance of the Council, how their respective propagandists used selected collections of documentary materials, such as conciliar acta and letters, florilegia, and historiography to corroborate their opinions and convince their audiences, and how attitudes developed in the 150 years after the Council.³ At the same time this permits a study of the last phase of late antique ecclesiastical historiography, and assessment of the genre’s characteristics and vitality.

² For later developments, see J. Herrin, The Formation of Christendom (Princeton, 1987).