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Uta Heil, Annette von Stockhausen (ed.), *Die Synoden im trinitarischen Streit: über die Etablierung eines synodalen Verfahrens und die Probleme seiner Anwendung im 4. und 5. Jahrhundert. Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, 177*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2017. Pp. viii, 231. ISBN 9783110419597. $103.99.

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Preview
[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review.]

Ecclesiastical synods of the fourth and fifth centuries are poorly documented. And the documents that do survive from the most important synods of the mid-fourth century—Serdica (343), Ankyra (358), Rimini (359), and Constantinople (360)—are often hopelessly complex in their compositional, redactional, and transmission history. Above all, documents and accounts that survive from the fourth century, before the reception of synods themselves became a chief point of disputation, do not contain significant details regarding the *how* of these meetings; at best, historians have to work with reliable evidence of synodal decisions, pieced together with hearsay regarding the manner in which those decisions were made. The "ecumenical" councils of the fifth century—above all Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon twenty years later—come down with copious documentation describing in excruciating detail one version of the goings-on of imperially invoked meetings nearly minute-by-minute.

Resisting the possibility of reading Theodosian-era conciliar practices into the mid-fourth century, editors Uta Heil and Annette von Stockhausen have collected papers presented at the 2011 International Conference for Patristic Studies in Oxford that peel back layers of evidence for the great variety of processes and situations in which synods were carried out in the fourth and fifth centuries, looking to uncover bits of history that, more often than not, our sources are reticent to divulge. The collection's stated aim, according to the introduction, is to explore from a variety of angles the status of orthodox Christian synods in the fourth and fifth centuries, as well as elements of their procedure that have gone largely unremarked upon in previous scholarship. Each chapter in this volume presents a re-reading of sources that will be common to just about anyone in the book's target audience, sometimes with surprising outcomes. In the introduction, Heil and von Stockhausen propose a series of animating questions, some of which are explored in the pages that follow, and some of which remain to be pursued. What did contemporary attendees consider themselves to be doing at synods? How did they go about doing it? Who was invited? How, and why? Was a synod's outcome preordained, or did the process

allow for something approaching genuinely open theological debate? In this frame of inquiry, Heil and von Stockhausen's volume fits with a recent trend in "patristic" scholarship and late ancient history more broadly that has reassessed documents of theological disputation with an eye toward social history.1

Richard Price's contribution traces the rise of appeal to the patristic commentarial tradition as theologically dispositive (what Mark Vessey has dubbed *retractatio patrum*) through the first six "ecumenical" councils, from the fourth through the seventh centuries. It shows that even the orthodox patristic authorities proved exhaustible resources as theological disputation became ever more fine-grained.2

Hanns Christof Brennecke's chapter traces the rise of the synod as an institution among the proto-orthodox movement, arguing that before the fourth century synods were a "rein kirchliche Institution;" neither hierarchical, nor easily enforceable (42). The chapter is particularly useful as an overview of the political stakes attendant to fourth-century synods, and he demonstrates that in the period after 324, synods were always performed in the shadow of the Caesar, but were not invariably a reflection of his will. The rapid development of the synod as political tool through the fourth century is bookended by the reign of Constantine, who began the process of transformation, and Theodosius I, who went so far as to revise imperial constitutions to reflect the results of synodal decisions (*CTh* 16.1.3).

Thomas Graumann and Nina Lubomierski's chapters both engage conciliar procedure in light of *Verfahrenstheorie*—"procedural theory" as defined by Niklas Lurmann, who demonstrated that procedural aspects of dispute are not ancillary, but are part of the meaning-making event itself. Graumann focuses on the synods of Sirmium and Rimini/Seleucia, asking what remained necessary to legitimate synodal decisions after the technical, theological disputation had come to a close. Graumann pushes back against MacMullen's representation of fourth century synods as democratic in some meaningful sense, and demonstrates the extent to which "orthodoxy" was secured not by decree, but through the subsequent public presentation of unity through achieved by synodal process.

For her part, Lubomierski asks whether the legitimacy of a conciliar decision itself can be vouchsafed by the legitimacy of the process through which that decision was achieved. Her answer, ultimately, is "no"—procedural legitimation, at least according to the theorists with whom Lubomerski interacts, requires a separation of powers and roles. The irregularity of the process against Dioscorus at Chalcedon in 451, in which attendants played equally the roles of defendants, prosecutors, advocates, witnesses, and judges, precluded its legitimacy.

Lubomierski's short, 12-page contribution forms a stark contrast with Christian Müller's chapter that follows. Weighing in at 96 pages, Müller's contribution alone forms nearly 45% of the entire volume's content. The book is slim to begin with—231 pages including the indices, and one wonders whether it would be too short to justify the price tag without Müller's disproportionate contribution. Müller's chapter itself comprises a comprehensive overview of the textual, historical, biographical, and theological problems standing in the way of our knowledge of Eusebius of Vercelli, asking ultimately after how Eusebius felt about his role in the Synod of Milan in 355 (124). Müller's historiographical review, discussing previous editions of sources for Eusebius, is extraordinarily detailed—reminiscent more of the introduction to a critical edition than

an edited volume contribution. By its own admission, the chapter does not offer a wholly new picture of Eusebius but a "anders akzentuiertes Bild des Bishofs" as a relatively lonely champion of the Nicene faith in the West, and a theological mind of note in its own right (185). (Sandwiched in the chapter, as well, is a 3,000 word "Exkurs" in which Müller responds to Manlio Simonetti's criticisms of his previous work on Eusebius.) Müller's contribution is not only the longest, it is also the one that stands out as most dissimilar to the method of the others, which generally are engaged in social and institutional history, and deal only incidentally with the particular theological disputes engaged at each of the synods. The other chapters read like they are coming out of the last fifteen years of research on the topic, while Müller's could fit easily within the methodological trends of the eighties and nineties work in "patristics," with a premium placed on localized approaches to doctrinal controversy.

Two short contributions end the collection, one from each editor. Annette von Stockhausen's chapter arises clearly from her work as an editor of the *Athanasius Werke* series. She returns to *Dok.* 55, a letter of the synod of Ankyra preserved in Epiphanius' *Panarion* that has been considered a central document of the "Arian controversy." Von Stockhausen is able to excavate convincingly a series of documents preceding and resulting from the Synod of Ankyra out of this letter, which is preserved in a single (admittedly corrupt) manuscript. She finds three "stages" of the synod proceedings, all of which are extant as part of the letter preserved in Epiphanius, and is able to reconstruct, with due reservation, the overall flow of the argument at this, among the most poorly attested major councils of the fourth century.

Uta Heil's contribution contextualizes the creeds of Constantinople (360) and Rimini (359) with reference to the "Second" Sirmian formula of 357, in which some attempted to diffuse the most controversial aspects of Christological dispute by dividing theological knowledge into two domains: that which humans are capable of knowing, and that which they cannot—the latter including the answer to debates over the "substance" of the son. Heil shows that while the specific wording of the Second Sirmian formula was rejected, its methodological distinction, and prohibition on discussion of *"ousia"* terminology, continued to reverberate in subsequent creedal formulas, including notably in the personal confession of Auxentius in 364/5.

As a collection, the chapters generally hang together and deliver on the stated promise: to analyze from a variety of angles questions regarding the aim, order, and legitimation of synods and their decrees. The chapters which most clearly succeed do so by way of case studies, tracing the variety of conciliar meetings, and the particularity of each. Those chapters which aim at synchronic discussions of conciliar legitimation, especially, fail to offer a plausible basis for comparison. Can the procedure of councils with no *acta* be profitably compared to those with *acta*? Can the procedure of, say the synod of Carthage in 256 really be compared with the council of Ephesus held nearly 200 years later, in the aftermath of the institutionalization of councils under Constantine and their new forms of documentation in the Theodosian empire? As a reader, I remain unconvinced. An attempt to read *acta* especially as something like verbatim transcripts is hamstrung by the content of the *acta* for Chalcedon themselves, for instance. Similarly some of the laments, like that of Richard Price, that historians who have engaged synod material "have shown more interest in conciliar politics than in conciliar theology," are misplaced (1). In this case, the concern seems to be more an artefact of the term "historian" than a useful line of critique, as typically the only scholars who have expressed an abiding interest in the material before the past fifteen years have been theologians.

The effect of the volume, as a whole, reinforces the impression that no single "synod procedure" was ever established in the fourth or even the fifth century. The copious information available, both through direct lines of transmission and through clever historical reconstruction, all points to the utter contingency of each meeting, and the extent to which local factors and individual personalities drove what only appears, in hindsight, to be a "trajectory" in conciliar processes.

Table of Contents

Uta Heil and Annette von Stockhausen – "Vorwort" (Introduction)
Richard Price – "Conciliar Theology: Resources and Limitations"
Hanns Christof Brennecke – "Synode als Institution zwischen Kaiser und Kirche in der Spätantike. Überlegungen zur Synodalgeschichte des 4. Jahrhunderts" (Synods as an Institution between Emperor and Church in Late Antiquity: Considerations of the Synodal History of the 4th century)
Thomas Graumann – "Theologische Diskussion und Entscheidung auf Synoden. Verfahrensformen und -erwartungen" (Theological Discussions and Decisions at Synods: Procedures and Expectations)
Nina Lubomierski – "Der Prozess gegen Dioscorus auf dem Konzil von Chalcedon. Legitimiert durch Verfahren?" (The Process against Dioscorus at the Council of Chalcedon: Legitimized through Process?)
Christian Müller – "Die Synode von Mailand 355, Eusebius von Vercelli und die Folgen" (The Synod of Milan in 355, Eusebius of Vercelli and the Aftermath)
Annette von Stockhausen – "Der Brief der Synode von Ankyra 358 (Dok. 55)" (The Letter from the Synod of Ankyra in 358 (Document 55))
Uta Heil – "Was wir glauben und was wir wissen. Zur Bilanz des trinitarischen Streits durch die Homöer" (What We Believe and What We Know: On the Outcome of the Trinitarian Controversy by the Homoians)

Notes:

1. Prominent examples among Anglophone scholarship include MacMullen, Ramsay, *Voting about God in Early Church Councils*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006; Millar, Fergus, *A Greek Roman Empire: Power and Belief under Theodosius II (408/450)*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006; Price, Richard, and Mary Whitby, eds., *Chalcedon in Context: Church Councils 400-700*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009. More work in this vein is being carried out by a recently funded ERC project at the University of Bamberg, under the direction of Dr. Dr. Peter Riedlberger.
2. Vessey, Mark. "The Forging of Orthodoxy in Latin Christian Literature: A Case Study." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4, no. 4 (1996): 495–513.

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