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Count Irenaeus and the Nestorian Controversy

by ROBIN WHELAN
University of Liverpool
E-mail: robin.whelan@Liverpool.ac.uk

Irenaeus has tended to be a bit player in modern narratives of the Nestorian controversy. Where the count features in accounts of the church politics of the 430s, it is as an essentially 'secular' figure: a conduit to the palace and supplier of coercive force for Nestorius and his Syrian episcopal allies. This article argues that Irenaeus was much more directly involved in doctrinal debate and the maintenance of ecclesiastical alliances than has been appreciated. The theological engagement and startling career shifts of this imperial count-turned-heresiarch-turned-bishop exemplify the significance of elite Christian patronage and official doctrinal engagement in 430s Constantinople.

In 436 CE, Nestorius was finally sent into exile.[1] The issuing of this penalty by the East Roman regime of Theodosius II (408–50) had been almost five years in the making. His precipitous resignation from the episcopate of Constantinople in September 431 had effectively confirmed the verdict of deposition issued by his opponents at the Council of Ephesus in June of that year.[2] This withdrawal was one of the

ACO = Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum; CAth = Collectio Atheniensis; CC = Collectio Casinensis; CJ = Codex Iustinianus; CV = Collectio Vaticana; CVer = Collectio Veronensis; *PLRE* = *Prosopography of the later Roman Empire*; *SC* = *Sources Chrétiennes*

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[1] CV 110, ACO 1.1.3, p. 67: without date, but from 436 since it addresses the praetorian prefect Isidorus as consul (an honour he received that year); *PLRE* ii. 631–3 (Isidorus 9); and, for example, F. Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire: power and belief under Theodosius II (408–450)*, Berkeley, CA 2006, 176, 179.

[2] For Nestorius' retirement in September 431 (and previous offers over the summer) see G. Bevan, *The new Judas: the case of Nestorius in ecclesiastical politics, 428–*

reasons why Theodosius II did not restore Nestorius to his see when the emperor granted that indulgence to his archenemy, Cyril of Alexandria (unseated by Nestorius' allies at Ephesus). But it did have its upsides. Retirement to his former monastery in Antioch helped the erstwhile bishop of Constantinople to avoid further punishment, while allowing him to influence church politics from the capital of the diocese of the East. These activities led Theodosius II's regime belatedly to make official Nestorius' status as the 'author of an unlawful heresy' by ordering him to be transported to Petra.[3] The former bishop of Constantinople was not the only recipient of this treatment. A further law sent to the praetorian prefect Isidorus, in either 435 or 436, ordered the salutary punishment of two 'participants in his impious worship': the *magnificentissimus comes* Irenaeus and the priest Photius.[4] In the eyes of the imperial regime, Count Irenaeus was no mere follower of Nestorius. Removal of rank, dispossession and exile were only suitable for an individual 'who not only followed the accursed sect of Nestorius, but promoted it, and took steps along with him to subvert many provinces, to the extent that he himself was at the head of this heresy'.[5] For Theodosius II and his consistory in 435/6, this senatorial grandee was as much a heresiarch as the disgraced bishop whom he supported.

This was not the first time Irenaeus had appeared in an imperial law regarding church politics. In his edict calling the Council of Ephesus (431), Theodosius II mentioned that the *comes* was travelling to the council, so as to clarify that he would be present only as a friend of Nestorius.[6] Nor was it the last: at some point in the mid-440s, Irenaeus made a comeback as bishop of Tyre.[7] This new career path met with further imperial displeasure, in the form of an order for his deposition and removal from that church on 17 February 448.[8] At some point between his first banishment in 435/6 and his death at an unknown date, Irenaeus wrote the *Tragoedia*: an account of how the compromises agreed by John of Antioch following Ephesus led to the betrayal of

451, Leuven 2016, 189–90, and R. Price and T. Graumann, *The Council of Ephesus of 431: documents and proceedings*, Liverpool 2020, 54, 536.

[3] 'ἀθεμίτου αἱρέσεως αὐθέντης'/'nefandae haeresis auctor': CV 110, ACO 1.1.3, p. 67; Latin version at CC 67, ACO 1.3, p. 180.

[4] 'impiae eius culturae participes': CC 277, ACO 1.4, p. 203; trans. in Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 180. The date is based on Isidorus' tenure of the praetorian prefecture (see n. 1 above). See Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 179.

[5] 'qui maledictum Nestorii cultum non solum secutus est, sed et instituit et studuit multas cum eo prouincias, eo quod ipse tali culturae praeesset, euertere': CC 277, ACO 1.4, p. 203; trans. Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 180.

[6] CV 31, ACO 1.1.1, p. 121 (Greek) = CC 23, ACO 1.3, p. 52 (Latin).

[7] On the date see now V. Menze, *Patriarch Dioscorus of Alexandria: the last pharaoh and ecclesiastical politics in the later Roman Empire*, Oxford 2023, 77 with n. 204.

[8] *CJ* 1.1.3, ed. P. Krüger, Berlin 1906, 5–6 = CC 138, ACO 1.1.4, p. 66.

Nestorius, the Eastern bishops and the whole Antiochene doctrinal tradition.[9] The basic framework of the text survives in the sixth-century Roman deacon Rusticus' Latin translation in the *Collectio Casinensis*, which quarries it for an array of original documents: laws, imperial orders and letters sent between emperors, officials and bishops – most notably, those within the diocese of the East. Rusticus rarely preserves Irenaeus' own commentary except to rebut it as part of his efforts to salvage the reputation of Theodoret of Cyrrhus (in the new Christological context of the Three Chapters Controversy) by disentangling him from Nestorius and the wider Eastern opposition to Cyril.[10] But those passages which do survive, along with the documents which Irenaeus selected, give a vivid sense of the sort of work which the ex-*comes* (and, possibly, ex-bishop) wrote. As with so many late ancient works of apologetic narrative – and especially those related to ecclesiastical politics – the *Tragoedia* seems to have depicted Irenaeus himself as a significant participant in contemporary events.

The surviving textual references to Irenaeus suggest that he had what the kids call 'main character energy'. Yet the *comes* has remained a supporting player in most modern narratives of the dramatic events of the Nestorian controversy. Irenaeus has received a single detailed study: paired with his better-known ally in a chapter on 'State power and moral defiance' in the late Fergus Millar's *Greek Roman Empire*.[11] Otherwise, he lurks in the margins (and footnotes) of accounts of the Nestorian controversy and its sequel in the late 440s. The *comes* necessarily features because of his presence in surviving documentation at those key moments: Ephesus (431), the proscriptions of the Nestorians and Nestorius (435/6) and the re-emergence of controversy in the Eastern Church in the run-up to Ephesus II (448–9). His episodic appearances in this extraordinarily well-documented narrative mean that individual studies rarely bring all the pieces of evidence about Irenaeus together in one place. Where historians have thought through Irenaeus' role in greater depth, they have tended (rightly) to stress his capacity to provide Nestorius, John and their Syrian episcopal allies with privileged access to the imperial palace and the infrastructure of the Eastern state. Less persuasively – at least, to my mind – they have also emphasised his ability to exercise state-sanctioned violence in the context of Ephesus. And yet, as the edict ordering his exile in 435/6 implies, Irenaeus' contribution to this Antiochene doctrinal faction cannot be reduced to that *entrée* to state power. Theodosius II's description of Irenaeus as the leader of the Nestorian heresy suggests that the *comes*

[9] On the text and the problem of the date see n. 61 below.
[10] See, for example, Price and Graumann, *Ephesus*, 15.
[11] Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 168–91.

played a more significant part in the church politics of the Eastern Roman Empire in the early 430s than has been appreciated.

This article proceeds from the premise that Irenaeus' role in the fifth-century Christological controversies deserves a new treatment. It builds on a series of excellent recent studies which have put our understanding of the Council of Ephesus (431) and its aftermath on a new footing. Drawing on these sophisticated accounts of church councils and their documentation, the role of the imperial palace and the influence of elite patrons within ecclesiastical politics, I argue that Irenaeus was more directly involved in doctrinal debate and the maintenance of ecclesiastical alliances than has been appreciated. The first part of this article analyses his attested contributions to church politics from his first appearance in surviving texts in the winter of 430. It tracks his role as an advocate, first for the Antiochene church faction at Ephesus, and then for Nestorius and his hardline supporters within the diocese of the East up until his exile, with a coda on his doctrinal positioning at the outbreak of new controversy in 448–9. Close attention to his own self-presentation and contemporary descriptions of his agency (including those of his enemies) suggest his significant role in mediating these theological debates and encouraging bishops, officials and the emperor himself to adopt the Christological precepts of Nestorius. The second part then sets these acts of doctrinal persuasion and ecclesiastical advocacy in the context of the wider engagement of the Constantinopolitan elite and bureaucracy with church politics in the reign of Theodosius II. Irenaeus emerges as unusual for his willingness to 'freelance' (in the terms of modern cabinet government): to diverge openly from the imperial line in ecclesiastical policy to support his episcopal ally, as opposed to merely seeking to shape that policy while the regime remained open to different courses of action. The count-turned-heresiarch-turned-bishop nevertheless appears as a typical product of an era when, in the words of Millar, 'State and church existed in a permanent condition of mutual dependence, concern, conflict – and commitment to the unattainable ideal of unity and harmony.'[12]

Irenaeus and church politics, 430–435/6

Irenaeus' first appearance is as an intermediary between John of Antioch and Nestorius in the winter of 430.[13] John had received letters from Cyril of Alexandria and Celestine of Rome informing him that an ultimatum was on its way to Nestorius.[14] A synod in Rome that August had

[12] Ibid. 133. [13] CV 14, ACO 1.1.1, pp. 93–6; CC 78, ACO 1.4, pp. 4–6.
[14] Celestine, *ep.* xii = CVer 6, ACO 1.2, pp. 21–2; Cyril, *ep.* xiii = CV 13, ACO 1.1.1, pp. 92–3.

decreed that Nestorius should be deposed if he did not recant his heretical views; after his own synod in Alexandria, Cyril sent on Celestine's notice of this verdict along with his *Third letter to Nestorius* and his *Twelve anathemas*, giving the bishop of Constantinople ten days to respond.[15] John wrote to Nestorius to advise him to yield on the probity of the term *Theotokos* for the Virgin (presented as an uncontroversial part of Christian tradition) so as to ensure the peace of the Church.[16] John sent this letter 'through my lord the in all respects most magnificent Count Irenaeus'.[17] His choice of letter carrier was likely determined, in part, by the need for speed: as George Bevan has suggested, it is likely that this use of Irenaeus (and his agents?) brought with it access to the public post. Certainly, it is noteworthy that John's letter (appending Celestine and Cyril's missives) got to Nestorius in Constantinople before Cyril's own agents arrived.[18] John's recourse to Irenaeus for this sensitive mission also suggests that the *comes* was already known to, and a trusted ally of, both parties by the winter of 430. The tone of the bishop of Antioch's letter suggests an awareness that his advice to compromise for the sake of peace would not be entirely welcome.[19] The opening to John's letter anticipates that Irenaeus will have cleared the ground for this case with his oral remarks. 'With complete sincerity I have made known to your religiousness my intentions towards you through my lord the in all respects most magnificent Count Irenaeus, and since, as I believe, I have now a true defence and am exempt from suspicion, I shall now address frank advice to your sincerity.'[20] Already in winter 430, Irenaeus had established himself as a figure

[15] Celestine, *ep.* xiii = CVer 2, ACO 1.2, pp. 7–12; Cyril, *ep.* xvii ('Third Letter of Cyril to Nestorius') = CV 6, ACO 1.1.1, pp. 33–42. For reconstructions of this stage of the controversy see C. Fraisse-Coué, 'Le Débat théologique au temps de Théodose II: Nestorius', in L. Petri (ed.), *Histoire du christianisme des origines à nos jours*, II: *Naissance d'une chrétienté (250–430)*, Paris 1995, 513–16; S. Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian controversy: the making of a saint and of a heretic*, Oxford 2004, 103–11; Bevan, *New Judas*, 130–4, 137–48; and Price and Graumann, *Ephesus*, 127–86.

[16] CV 14, ACO 1.1.1, pp. 93–6.

[17] 'διὰ τοῦ κυρίου μου τοῦ τὰ πάντα μεγαλοπρεπεστάτου κόμητος Εἰρηναίου': CV 14, c. 1, ACO 1.1.1, p. 93; trans. in Price, *Ephesus*, 176.

[18] Bevan, *New Judas*, 143. The likelihood of an additional intermediary is suggested by Nestorius' response (CC 78, c. 2, ACO 1.4, p. 5), where the original letter is presented as addressed to Nestorius and Irenaeus (as opposed to Nestorius through Irenaeus).

[19] See especially CV 14, cc. 1–2, ACO 1.1.1, pp. 93–4. See also D. Fairbairn, 'Allies or merely friends? John of Antioch and Nestorius in the Christological controversy', this JOURNAL lviii (2007), 383–99, noting p. 393 with n. 29 on Irenaeus, and Bevan, *New Judas*, 141–3, 164, who stresses that the apparent alliance between John and Nestorius was not straightforward.

[20] 'Τὸν ἐμαυτοῦ σκοπὸν περὶ τὴν σὴν θεοσέβειαν μετὰ πάσης ἀληθείας διὰ τοῦ κυρίου μου τοῦ τὰ πάντα μεγαλοπρεπεστάτου κόμητος Εἰρηναίου ἐδήλωσα τῇ σῇ διαθέσει καὶ ἐπειδή, ὡς νομίζω, πάσης εἰμὶ λοιπὸν ὑποψίας ἐκτὸς ἀληθέσιν ἀπολογίαις χρησάμενος,

trusted by both Nestorius and John accurately to represent them within the controversy which was beginning to engulf the Church of the Eastern Empire.

It is this position of trust which led Irenaeus to travel to Ephesus in spring 431 as a friend of Nestorius. His presence at the council as such is specifically mentioned in the imperial *sacra* convoking the council. Theodosius II informed the assembled bishops 'that the most magnificent Irenaeus has travelled with the most holy and most God-beloved Nestorius, bishop of this renowned city, out of friendship alone, and is not on any account to take part in the business of your most holy council or in the matters entrusted to the most glorious Candidianus whom we have sent'.[21] The emperor explicitly spelled out that Irenaeus was not present in an official capacity, implying potential concerns that he would attempt to influence proceedings by presenting his actions as imperially sanctioned, and perhaps even by claiming to share the authority of the *comes domesticorum* Candidianus, the actual officer commissioned to preside over the council.[22] In fact, it is possible that Irenaeus had been mentioned in dispatches at court for this role.[23] The *Coptic acts of Ephesus*, produced in Alexandria most likely in the middle decades of the fifth century, include a supposed memorandum from Cyril to a monk named Victor providing instructions for a mission to the court in Constantinople in early 431.[24] Amongst the many ways the bishop of Alexandria wished Victor to persuade the emperor to shape the conduct of the council, he is supposed to have asked him to work against any request from Nestorius that Irenaeus preside, since the latter would be biased. Victor should instead ask for the *cubicularius* Lausus – elsewhere presented by Cyril's archdeacon Epiphanius as an ally – or, at worst, that the two be sent together.[25] The

πεπαρρησιασμένῃ λοιπὸν χρῶμαι πρὸς τὴν σὴν γνησιότητα συμβουλίαι': CV 14, c. 1, ACO 1.1.1, p. 93; trans. Price, *Ephesus*, 176.

[21] 'Εἰρηναῖον δὲ τὸν μεγαλοπρεπέστατον ἄνδρα φιλίας μόνης χάριν συνεκδεδημηκέναι τῷ ἁγιωτάτῳ καὶ θεοφιλεστάτῳ ἐπισκόπῳ τῆσδε τῆς μεγαλωνύμου πόλεως Νεστορίῳ μήτε τοῖς σκέμμασι τῆς ἁγιωτάτης ὑμῶν συνόδου μήτε μὴν τοῖς ἐγχειρισθεῖσι τῷ παρ' ἡμῶν ἀποσταλέντι ἐνδοξοτάτῳ ἀνδρὶ Κανδιδιανῷ κατά τινα λόγον κοινωνήσοντα': CV 31, ACO 1.1.1, p. 121; trans. Price, *Ephesus*, 216.

[22] *PLRE* ii. 257–8 (Candidianus 6); on these instructions see especially T. Graumann, 'Theodosius II and the politics of the First Council of Ephesus', in C. Kelly (ed.), *Theodosius II: rethinking the Roman Empire in late antiquity*, Cambridge 2013, 109–29, and Bevan, *New Judas*, 150–1.

[23] E. Schwartz, *Cyrill und der Mönch Viktor*, Vienna 1928, 25–6.

[24] Date: for example, R. Price, 'Fact and fiction, emperor and council, in the Coptic Acts of Ephesus', *Annuarium Historiae Conciliorum* xlvi (2014), 9–26 at pp. 9, 14–15.

[25] *Coptic acts of Ephesus*, ed. U. Bouriant, in *Actes du concile d'Éphèse: text copte publié et traduit*, Paris 1892, 7; trans. W. Kraatz, in *Koptische Akten zum Ephesenischen Konzil vom Jahre 431*, Leipzig 1904, 6; with CC 293, c. 6, ACO 1.4, pp. 223–4, where Cyril's archdeacon Epiphanius seeks to have the (hostile) *cubicularius* Chryseros replaced with Lausus. See also Bevan, *New Judas*, 150 n. 5.

precise historicity of this memorandum is difficult to judge: the long narrative which precedes the actual minutes of the first session in the surviving portion of the text includes a teasing mixture of obvious hagiographical falsification and plausible documentary detail.[26] It is most probably – like Victor's mission itself – a later narrative invention, built out of the terms of the *sacra* itself, to provide that document and the proceedings of the council with a retrospective Cyrilline logic.[27] Whether or not this fear of Irenaeus' candidacy draws on actual contemporary discussions, a concern of this sort must lie behind the inclusion of this specific stipulation in the final sentence of the imperial *sacra*.

Such a concern is plausible given what transpired during the council. The presence of a figure of Irenaeus' stature in the imperial hierarchy provided benefits to Nestorius and the Easterners above and beyond the state support granted to other major participants.[28] George Bevan has hypothesised that Irenaeus helped his allies get information back to court.[29] As part of the mutual recriminations between the rival councils, the *comes* was also accused of intimidation tactics on behalf of Nestorius and John. The memorandum sent by Cyril and Memnon of Ephesus' council to Theodosius II through the *agens in rebus* Palladius on 1 July painted a stark picture of Irenaeus' treatment of its members. 'But we, being under constraint, have not been able to inform your authority in a few words of the extent of our sufferings at the hands of the most magnificent Count Irenaeus, who has harassed the entire holy council and terrorised the most holy bishops by tumult and by external canvassing, with the result that many of us are in fear for our very lives.'[30] In an (undated) letter from summer 431, Memnon similarly requested the help of the

[26] See especially Price, 'Fact and fiction'.

[27] The other requests made by 'Cyril' at *Coptic acts* (Bouriant edn), 6–7, trans. Kraatz, 5–6, also seem to be backformed from the *sacra*: good order and a prevention of disciplinary complaints against bishops at the council.

[28] John of Antioch and Cyril were deputed *agentes in rebus* to assist them. See CC 82, ACO 1.4, p. 27 for the *praefectiani* and *magistriani* bringing reports on John's delayed progress to Ephesus, and Actio II, c. 47, ACO 2.1.2, p. 16 for the speech at the Council of Chalcedon (451) of the Alexandrian deacon (and former *agens in rebus*) Theodore recounting how he was deputised to Cyril for the council. R. Price and M. Gaddis, *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, Liverpool 2005, ii. 51, translate the key passage as 'Cyril … made me a deputy', but the Greek is simply 'Cyril had me as a deputy' (δηπουτάτον με ἔσχεν), *PLRE* ii.1088 (Theodore 14). On *deputatus* as a technical term for an official secondment see P. Rance, 'Health, wounds, and medicine in the late Roman army (250–600 CE)', in L. Brice (ed.), *New approaches to Greek and Roman warfare*, Hoboken, NJ 2020, 173–85 at p. 179.

[29] Bevan, *New Judas*, 165–6. This advantage, however, should not be exaggerated on the basis of Cyrillian complaints: see esp. Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 232.

[30] 'ἡμεῖς δὲ συσχεθέντες δι' ὀλίγων ἀντιγράψαι τῷ ὑμετέρῳ κράτει τό πλάτος ὧν πεπόνθαμεν καὶ παρὰ τοῦ μεγαλοπρεπεστάτου κόμητος Εἰρηναίου, οὐ δεδυνήμεθα τοῦ πᾶσαν διαταράξαντος τὴν ἁγίαν σύνοδον καὶ φόβον ἐπικρεμάσαντος τοῖς ἁγιωτάτοις

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clergy of Constantinople in persuading the emperor to remove Irenaeus from Ephesus along with Candidianus, 'lest the faith be corrupted by their brigandage'.[31] Both passages convey the impression that Irenaeus brought with him threats of physical violence, whether overt or simply implied by his rank and position of political influence. Modern scholars have often built out of these intimations a developed role for the *comes* as an individual either fulfilling an imperial request or usurping the authority of the conciliar president to conduct police actions. Most noteworthy in this regard are the accounts of John McGuckin and George Bevan, in which Irenaeus brought a private force of bodyguards, co-ordinated with Candidianus and his imperial soldiers, and used both contingents to defend John and Nestorius and attack Memnon, Cyril and their allies.[32] Whenever soldiers are described around the residences of the bishops of Constantinople and Antioch, these narratives ascribe their actions to Irenaeus' attitudes and commands in concert with the *comes domesticorum*.[33]

It is important to stress that Memnon, Cyril and their council do not make these connections themselves. There is no indication in their letters of Irenaeus exercising a formal role in charge of imperial soldiers in Ephesus. This recurring hypothesis may result, in part, from earlier misunderstandings of the implications of Irenaeus' title. Some modern treatments have assumed that his title indicated his exercise of a military command.[34] Yet this is only one possible interpretation of his position as a *magnificentissimus comes*. All that can be known for certain from this

ἐπισκόποις διὰ θορύβων τινῶν καὶ τῆς ἔξω περιδρομῆς, ὡς καὶ τοὺς πλείονας ἡμῶν περὶ αὐτοῦ κινδυνεύειν τοῦ ζῆν': CV 84, c. 5, ACO 1.1.3, p. 12; trans. Price, *Ephesus*, 361.

[31] 'ἵνα μὴ ἐκ συναρπαγῆς τούτων νοθεύηται τὰ τῆς πίστεως': CV 101, ACO 1.1.3, p. 47; trans. Price, *Ephesus*, 338.

[32] J. McGuckin, *St Cyril of Alexandria: the Christological controversy: its history, theology, and texts*, Leiden 1994, 52, 54–5, 74–5, 79–80, 91–2, 94, 101; Bevan, *New Judas*, esp. pp. 153, 162. See also T. Gregory, *Vox populi: violence and popular involvement in the religious controversies of the fifth century AD*, Columbus, Oh 1979, 101–5, 107–8, and D. Slootjes, 'Dynamics of power: the Nestorian controversy, the Council of Ephesus of 431, and the Eastern imperial court', in C. Davenport and M. McEvoy (ed.), *The Roman imperial court in the principate and late antiquity*, Oxford 2023, 240–61 at p. 253. Note too A. M. Schor, *Theodoret's people: social networks and religious conflict in late Roman Syria*, Berkeley, Ca 2011, 86. Schor suggests that the soldiers in front of Nestorius' residence at the time of his third summons were Irenaeus' bodyguards.

[33] McGuckin, *Cyril*, 54–5, also connects this hypothetical Irenaean bodyguard to Socrates, *Ecclesiastical history*, 7.34.2, ed. G. C. Hansen, *Sokrates: Kirchengeschichte*, Berlin 1995, 382, where Nestorius enters Ephesus σὺν πολλῇ δυνάμει ὄχλων, a phrase translated by McGuckin as 'with "a large number of armed guards"' (at p. 54). A military interpretation is possible, but a more straightforward rendering would be something like 'a great mass of people'; compare, for example, Gregory, *Vox populi*, 101: 'a powerful mob', and Bevan, *New Judas*, 149: 'a powerful mob of supporters'.

[34] See, for example, Gregory, *Vox populi*, 123 n. 108: 'obviously a military officer'; W. Beers, '"Furnish whatever is lacking to their avarice": the payment programme of

titulature is that Irenaeus was a member of the Constantinopolitan Senate with the rank of *uir illustris*.[35] The tenor of his various interventions in ecclesiastical politics on behalf of his episcopal allies suggests considerable experience in navigating the imperial palace and consistory. This capacity for independent influence belies the suggestion in the *Coptic acts of Ephesus* that Irenaeus owed his status as an *illustris* to a request from Nestorius; at the very least, it suggests that any such intercession built on a pre-existing imperial career.[36] Pinning down the precise position (current or former) within the imperial state which might have brought him his titles and established him as a figure of political significance is difficult. The problem is that, despite the likelihood of a distinguished career in imperial service, Irenaeus is known only through reports on his ecclesiastical freelancing and subsequent episcopal career. Various suggestions have been made, including that he was *comes Orientis*,[37] *comes rei militaris*[38] or *ex comite domesticorum*.[39] Given his travel to, or residence in, Constantinople in the winter of 430, an ongoing tenure as head of the civil administration of the diocese of the East seems implausible. His private visit to Ephesus in spring/summer 431 suggests something similar for a current role as commander of an army unit. It seems much more likely that Irenaeus was either a count of the consistory, or had received an honorary *comitiua* (of which there were several) through imperial appointment or through previous possession of high office within the Eastern civil or military hierarchy.[40] Whatever his precise position, its functional significance for our understanding of his role in these ecclesiastical politics remains the same: as a figure of significance in the imperial palace.[41] Most importantly, there is no indication that Theodosius II intended Irenaeus to travel to Ephesus as a military guard for Nestorius; indeed, the edict of convocation seeks to prevent the potential misunderstanding that he be seen as a

Cyril of Alexandria', in N. Matheou, T. Kampianaki and L. Bondioli (eds), *From Constantinople to the frontier: the city and the cities*, Leiden 2016, 67–83 at p. 68.

[35] On *magnificentissimus* as a title for senators of *illustris* grade see A. H. M. Jones, *The later Roman Empire, 284–602: a social, economic and administrative survey*, ii, Oxford 1964, 543–4; for its more general application to high-status individuals see R. Delmaire, 'Les Dignitaries laïcs au Concile de Chalcédoine: notes sur la hiérarchie et les préséances au milieu du ve siècle', *Byzantion* liv (1984), 141–75 at pp. 157–61.

[36] *Coptic acts* (Bouriant edn), 6–7; and see already Schwartz, *Cyrill*, 26.

[37] Gregory, *Vox populi*, 123 n. 108; Slootjes, 'Dynamics', 253.

[38] Gregory, *Vox populi*, 123 n. 108.

[39] Schwartz, *Cyrill*, 26; noted by Fraisse-Coué, 'Nestorius', 521 n. 126.

[40] On these, and the *comitiua* more generally, see Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, ii. 526–9, 534–5; Delmaire, 'Dignitaires laïcs', 144–53; and C. Davenport and M. McEvoy, 'Introduction: connecting courts', in Davenport and McEvoy, *Roman imperial court*, 25–6.

[41] Note the chants against Irenaeus in the *Coptic acts* (Bouriant edn), 50, 53, trans. Price, *Ephesus*, 640, 642: 'remove the shame from the palace'.

representative of imperial authority.[42] He is not attested as bringing a military command or receiving a special investment with imperial forces. At most, he would have brought the small but 'skilled military force' which, as McGuckin neatly puts it, 'no Byzantine aristocrat would have travelled across the provinces without'.[43] Accusations of 'brigandage' and threats to life imply an armed entourage of this sort, which may or may not have been involved in the various moments of mistreatment documented in the *Acts* and petitions of Cyril's council. They cannot sustain reconstructions of an overarching police command during the council.

Of course, Irenaeus could still have usurped this military role through collusion with the actual officer assigned to fulfil it. Yet the reports of the Cyrilline council are similarly unhelpful for a reconstruction which has Irenaeus and Candidianus collude in turning the latter's security detail into a means to suppress and coerce Cyril and his allies. In his letter to the clergy of Constantinople decrying the actions of Nestorius and John of Antioch, Memnon of Ephesus explicitly separates the crimes of Irenaeus from the parallel sets of actors engaged in intimidation of the Cyrilline council: imperial soldiers under Candidianus, Constantinopolitan bath attendants and peasants in receipt of ecclesiastical charity.

> At one time the most magnificent Count Candidianus set soldiers upon us, filled the city with tumult, used a guard to prevent delivery of all the necessities, and allowed many people to rain violence upon us and the entire holy council, since those of Zeuxippus stood fast by the deposed Nestorius, and in addition fed a large number of rustics at the church's expense, and used them to rain down violence upon us. The disorder just described, and also the daily deceit of the more gullible by the most magnificent Count Irenaeus, were followed by the arrival of the bishop of Antioch.[44]

Memnon did not ascribe responsibility for any of these attacks to Irenaeus; they merely ran in parallel to his fraudulent efforts to persuade some of the conciliar Fathers on behalf of Nestorius. In a key passage later in the same text, the bishop of Ephesus does depict Irenaeus' involvement in a specific act of violence. Memnon describes how his envoys spent hours waiting and

[42] See n. 21 above. Contrast, for example, Wessel, *Cyril*, 150, where Irenaeus is an 'imperial representative'.

[43] McGuckin, *Cyril*, 55.

[44] 'ποτὲ μὲν γὰρ ὁ μεγαλοπρεπέστατος κόμης Κανδιδιανὸς ἐπισείων ἡμῖν τοὺς στρατιώτας καὶ τὴν πόλιν ταραχῆς ἐμπιπλῶν καὶ πάντων ὁμοῦ τῶν ἐπιτηδείων τῆς εἰσκομιδῆς ἀποστερῶν διὰ τῆς παραφυλακῆς, πολλοὺς δὲ συγχωρῶν ὕβρεις καταχέειν ἡμῶν τε καὶ πάσης τῆς ἁγίας συνόδου τῶν τοῦ Ζευξίππου παραμενόντων τῷ καθηρημένῳ Νεστορίῳ καὶ ἐπὶ τούτῳ τρεφομένων καὶ πολὺ πλῆθος χωρικῶν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐκκλησιαστικῶν κτημάτων καὶ δι᾽ ἐκείνων τὰς ὕβρεις καταχεόντων, διεδέξατο καὶ τὴν προειρημένην ἀταξίαν καὶ τοῦ μεγαλοπρεπεστάτου κόμητος Εἰρηναίου τὴν καθημερινὴν ἀπάτην τῶν ἀφελεστέρων καὶ ἡ τοῦ Ἀντιοχέως ἐπισκόπου παρουσία': CV 101, ACO 1.1.3, p. 46; trans. Price, *Ephesus*, 336–7.

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suffering harassment before John of Antioch finally granted them entrance to his residence. 'When they relayed to him the message from the holy council, he [John] allowed the most magnificent Irenaeus and the bishops and clerics with him to inflict insufferable blows on our fellow minsters and the clerics, with the result that they were in real danger.'[45] This accusation looks like many other claims of physical intimidation at late ancient church councils. The resemblance is telling. When we finally see Irenaeus in (violent) action, there is no mention of guards or soldiers accompanying him: a notable feature in a letter filled with references to various sorts of armed bands whom Memnon could easily have redeployed here (soldiers, attendants from the Baths of Zeuxippus, rustics). Instead, we find the *comes* alone amongst bishops and clerics, conducting the sort of violence that churchmen did (or were alleged to do) at church councils.

If the reports on Irenaeus' involvement at Ephesus simply ascribed to him these acts of violence, he would, paradoxically, be a less challenging figure to pin down. The *comes* would simply be one of the many wielders of imperial authority in late antiquity accused of using coercion to bring recalcitrant bishops into line. Yet the complaints of Cyril's party instead make references to more subtle efforts to shape the views and allegiances of the episcopal attendees. To reiterate: they suggested that Irenaeus had attempted 'daily deceit of the more gullible' and disturbed the bishops with 'external canvassing'.[46] Accusations of tricking the simple-minded were a standard recourse for those seeking to delegitimate 'heretical' opponents in theological argumentation.[47] For the Cyrillians, this rhetorical violence was as important as the physical kind supposedly inflicted by the count. In this sense, the problem with Irenaeus' participation at Ephesus does not seem to have been that of improper use of imperial forces. Rather, it seems to have been that of an influential layman inappropriately interfering in the doctrinal discussions of priests – and bringing the implied threat of his influence within the imperial palace to bear as he did so.

In the aftermath of the rival conciliar meetings in late June, and a mission from the *agens in rebus* Palladius to assess the resulting damage, Irenaeus' doctrinal and ecclesiastical expertise was pressed into service

[45] 'ὡς δὲ τὰ παρὰ τῆς ἁγίας συνόδου φανερὰ πεποιήκασιν αὐτῷ, συνεχώρησε τὸν μεγαλοπρεπέστατον Εἰρηναῖον καὶ τοὺς σὺν αὐτῷ ἐπισκόπους τε καὶ κληρικοὺς ἀφορήτους ἐπιθεῖναι πληγὰς τοῖς ἡμετέροις συλλειτουργοῖς καὶ τοῖς κληρικοῖς, ὡς καὶ κινδύνοις αὐτοὺς προσομιλῆσαι': CV 101, ACO 1.1.3, p. 46; trans. Price, *Ephesus*, 337.

[46] 'τὴν καθημερινὴν ἀπάτην τῶν ἀφελεστέρων': CV 101, ACO 1.1.3, p. 46; trans. Price, *Ephesus*, 337; 'τῆς ἔξω περιδρομῆς': CV 84, c. 5, ACO 1.1.3, p. 12; trans. Price, *Ephesus*, 361.

[47] See especially, R. Lim, *Public disputation, power and social order in late antiquity*, Berkeley, CA 1995, 93–4, 102, and K. Eshleman, *The social world of intellectuals in the Roman Empire: sophists, philosophers and Christians*, Cambridge 2012, 91–124.

once again as the mouthpiece of the Eastern bishops.[48] Irenaeus was sent to Constantinople in the middle of July with two letters to the emperor, alongside missives to the empresses and to prominent members of the consistory (the praetorian prefect and the master of offices) and bedchamber (the *praepositus sacri cubiculi* and the *cubicularius* Scholasticius).[49] The second letter to the emperor which John and the council included in this packet explained that their exclusion from services held by Memnon and Cyril in the city's cathedral alongside the Cyrillines' persistent refusal to meet had forced them to send a petition through the *comes*. Irenaeus had 'accurate knowledge of what has taken place, and we have taught him many remedies that could restore peace to the holy churches of God; we entreat your clemency to learn these remedies patiently from him and to give orders that the decisions of your piety be put speedily into effect'.[50] The stress in the council's letter on the bishops' instruction of the count implies a certain unease over the appointment of a layperson for this mission. Nevertheless, as in the letter from John to Nestorius in winter 430, the role envisaged for Irenaeus was faithfully to represent a doctrinal and ecclesiastical position in a moment of crisis.

Irenaeus' conduct of his embassy to the court explored the outer reaches of the latitude which the council's instructions had given him. The *comes* recounted the mission in a letter whose tone of barely concealed self-aggrandisement might give us some indication of what is missing from the skeletal surviving version of the *Tragoedia*.[51] The Egyptian bishops sent by Cyril had arrived three days previously, leaving Irenaeus with an uphill struggle in his representations; through their lies, they had managed to convince 'the great officials, those holding dignities, and those in various government positions' (τοὺς μεγάλους ἄρχοντας και τοὺς ἐν ἀξιώμασι τελοῦντος καὶ τοὺς ἐν στρατείαις διαφόροις) that due process had been followed in the deposition of Nestorius.[52] The *cubicularius* Scholasticius, an erstwhile ally of Nestorius, had been told that the bishop had spoken categorically against *Theotokos* while in Ephesus.[53] Despite these unpropitious circumstances, 'through the irresistible power of truth and your prayers' and 'by God's mercy', Irenaeus got an audience

[48] On this mission see especially, Fraisse-Coué, 'Nestorius', 537–8; Bevan, *New Judas*, 176–8; and Slootjes, 'Dynamics', 256–7.

[49] CV 158–62, ACO 1.1.5, pp. 129–33.

[50] 'τά τε γὰρ γεγενημένα ἀκριβῶς ἐπίσταται καὶ μεμάθηκε παρ' ἡμῶν πολλοὺς θεραπείας τρόπους δι' ὧν δυνατὸν τὸ ἀτάραχον ταῖς ἁγίαις τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκκλησίαις παρασχεῖν. Οὓς ἱκετεύομεν ἀνεξικάκως τὴν ὑμετέραν παρ' αὐτοῦ μαθεῖν ἡμερότητα καὶ τὸ δοκοῦν τῇ ὑμετέρᾳ εὐσεβείᾳ θᾶττον κελεῦσαι γενέσθαι': CV 159, ACO 1.1.5, p. 131; trans. Price, *Ephesus*, 417.

[51] CV 164, ACO 1.1.5, pp. 135–6. All the quotations in this paragraph, trans. Price, *Ephesus*, 423–5.

[52] CV 164, c. 2, ACO 1.1.5, p. 135.

[53] CV 164, c. 3, ACO 1.1.5, p. 135.

with 'the most magnificent officials'; he was thus able to make 'all the offences violently committed by the Egyptian and his supporters' known to 'those in authority'.[54] These preliminary meetings gained him an audience where he would argue against the Egyptian bishops before the emperor and consistory. Irenaeus stressed his reluctance to assume the prosecution in this hearing given that, as a mere letter bearer, he had not received specific instructions from the bishops as to how to proceed. The potential awkwardness of a layman and imperial official arguing against bishops about doctrine and ecclesiastical procedure is vitiated by a combination of imperial coercion (his expression of reluctance almost had him 'torn to pieces' [διεσπάσθην]) and divine providence (which 'pointed the heart of the ruler to the truth' [τὴν τοῦ κρατοῦντος πρὸς τὸ ἀληθὲς ἰθυνάσης καρδίαν]).[55] Irenaeus won the argument, and the depositions of Cyril and Memnon were in train until the arrival of Cyril's doctor and *syncellus*, John, suddenly and suspiciously, changed minds at court. The *comes* seems to have continued to seek meetings with various officials after the hearing before the emperor, but he found them 'different people' (ἑτέρους ὥσπερ γεγενημένους); they refused to discuss the ruling which had resulted. Irenaeus' soundings identified conflicting strains of opinion about what should happen next: Cyril, Memnon and Nestorius should all be deposed, or none of them should be deposed; representatives of both parties should be summoned to Constantinople, or a new mission should go to Ephesus to resolve the dispute.[56] Irenaeus gives an admittedly self-dramatising, but none the less highly circumstantial account of his mission to the court. His letter narrates a campaign of doctrinal persuasion of imperial officials by a (current or former) imperial official.

After this letter of July 431, Irenaeus disappears until either 435 or 436, when Theodosius II ordered that he should be banished to Petra and lose his property and status. The *comes* had clearly continued to work on Nestorius' behalf: as previously noted, Theodosius charged that he had 'not only followed the accursed sect of Nestorius, but promoted it, and took steps along with him to subvert many provinces, to the extent that he himself was at the head of this heresy'.[57] Any reconstruction of these

[54] 'ὅμως διὰ τὴν τῆς ἀληθείας ἀκαταγώνιστον δύναμιν καὶ τὰς ὑμετέρας εὐχὰς ἐξίσχυσα διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ τοὺς ἐκ προοιμίων κινδύνους, ὡς ἔφην, διαφυγὼν συντυχεῖν τε τοῖς μεγαλοπρεπεστάτοις ἄρχουσι καὶ πᾶσαν αὐτοῖς, ὡς ἐνεχώρει, τὴν τοῦ πράγματος ἀλήθειαν ἐξηγήσασθαι. οἳ τὰ παρ᾽ ἡμῶν διδαχθέντες καὶ εἰς αὐτὰς ἐνεγκεῖν ἠναγκάσθησαν τῶν κρατούντων τὰς ἀκοὰς ὅσαπερ εἴς τε τὴν προκειμένην ὑπόθεσιν, καὶ εἰς ὑμᾶς δὲ αὐτοὺς οἱ περὶ τὸν Αἰγύπτιον τυραννικῶς ἐπλημμέλησαν': CV 164, c. 3, ACO 1.1.5, p. 135.

[55] CV 164, cc 3–4, ACO 1.1.5, pp. 135–6, quotations at pp. 135, 135–6.

[56] CV 164, cc 4–5, ACO 1.1.5, p. 136.

[57] 'qui maledictum Nestorii cultum non solum secutus est, sed et instituit et studuit multas cum eo prouincias, eo quod ipse tali culturae praeesset, euertere': CC 277, ACO 1.4, p. 203; trans. Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 180.

activities is necessarily speculative: it is possible that Irenaeus had pressed the retired bishop's case in Constantinople, or that he had joined Nestorius in monastic retirement in Antioch. Certainly, the presence of a party in Constantinople calling for the bishop's return after the death of Maximian in 434 seems to have been part of the reason for Proclus' speedy consecration, for renewed demands for statements of communion and conformity from recalcitrant Eastern bishops, and, eventually, for imperial legislation against 'Nestorians' and Nestorius himself. At the same time, these measures also stemmed directly from the efforts of John of Antioch to suppress dissent within the diocese of the East towards his agreement with Cyril (the Formula of Reunion of 433).[58] Theodosius' reference to the subversion of provinces most likely implies Irenaeus' continuing influence within the network of Syrian bishops who opposed acceptance of Nestorius' deposition and reconciliation with his enemies.[59] Various pieces of circumstantial evidence suggest regular residence in Syria and perhaps even Antioch itself.[60] Above all, Irenaeus had access to a substantial body of often highly sensitive letters between bishops of John and Nestorius' Syrian ecclesiastical network which he reproduced in his *Tragoedia*, as part of what must have been a detailed narrative of the internal wranglings between the bishops of the diocese of the East. The date of this text is uncertain, although there are good reasons to place it soon after his exile in 435/6.[61] Whenever he wrote the

[58] For an excellent summary see C. Fraisse-Coué, 'D'Éphèse à Chalcédoine: "la paix trompeuse" (433–451)', in L. Petri (ed.), *Histoire du christianisme des origines à nos jours*, III: *Les églises d'Orient et d'Occident*, Paris 1998, 9–77 at pp. 19–25.

[59] On these bishops (and wider Syrian episcopal networks) see Schor, *Theodoret's people*, 100–9, and Bevan, *New Judas*, 245–52.

[60] As discussed above, either Irenaeus or (more likely) his agents were in Antioch in November 430; his pre-existing relationship with John and Nestorius likewise implies previous activity there: see n. 13 above. At some point in the early 430s, Theodoret sent Irenaeus a letter conveying his disappointment that the *comes* did not join him for Easter in Cyrrhus as he had hoped: Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Epistulae* xiv, ed. Y. Azéma, in *Théodoret de Cyr: Correspondance*, I: *Collection de Patmos*, *SC* xl, Paris 1982, 86. Likewise, in the mid-440s, when the bishop of Cyrrhus consoled his (now) episcopal colleague on the death of a relative, Theodoret had heard the news through friends in Antioch: Theodoret, *ep.* xii, ed. Y. Azéma, *Théodoret de Cyr: Correspondance*, II: *Collection sirmondienne: lettre 1–lettre 95*, *SC* xcviii, Paris 1964, 40–5.

[61] First exile: *PLRE* ii. 624 (Irenaeus 2); G. Bevan, 'Theodoret of Cyrrhus and Syrian episcopal elections', in J. Leemans, P. Van Nuffelen, S. Keough and C. Nicolaye (eds), *Episcopal elections in late antiquity*, Berlin 2008, 61–87 at p. 78; Beers, 'Avarice', 69; M. Smith, *The idea of Nicaea in the early church councils, AD 431–451*, Oxford 2018, 130 (after 435/6); M. De Leeuw, 'Buying imperial favour: Cyril of Alexandria's blessings', in K. Chodha, M. De Leeuw and F. Schulz (eds), *Gaining and losing imperial favour in late antiquity: representation and reality*, Leiden 2020, 151–70 at p. 154. Second exile: Schor, *Theodoret's people*, 125 (though note p. 210 n. 50). Potentially either Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 169 or Price and Graumann, *Ephesus*, 9 n. 21. Certainty is impossible, but it is

Tragoedia, Irenaeus' ability to collect these letters, including texts written by and to bishops who were ejected from their sees in 434/5,[62] suggest that he must have been active in Syria in the first half of the 430s. Indeed, his privileged access to these letters could imply that he continued to facilitate communications within this network.

Both the surviving fragments of Irenaeus' *Tragoedia* and reports on his episcopal career suggest his continued theological advocacy and doctrinal acumen. Drawing on Rusticus' summaries and likely preservation of the original ordering of the documents, recent studies have persuasively suggested that Irenaeus' original text stressed the significance of Cyril's bribes and John and Theodoret's betrayal in Nestorius' defeat.[63] But it is important to note that the *Tragoedia*'s interpretation of the church politics of the 430s was not simply about personal moral failings. Surviving passages of Irenaeus' own words (as well as Rusticus' paraphrases) also suggest he made the doctrinal case that Nestorius was not an innovator, but rather represented the mainstream of Antiochene tradition. Rusticus responds to passages where Irenaeus charged John and Theodoret with hypocrisy for abandoning Nestorius when they agreed with his teachings.[64] In defence of Theodoret, the Roman deacon invoked Irenaeus' own apparent ability to trim his sails. Rusticus claimed that Irenaeus had anathematised Nestorius in return for his consecration by Domnus of Antioch.[65] Some such finessing of his public doctrinal position in episcopal office can be

plausible that it was written after his exile in 435/6, given that the last document it preserved (at least from Rusticus' reuse of it) seems to be the imperial order against him, capped by the two letters which document Cyril's use of bribes in 431–2. But on this score a later date is also possible, especially given the efforts of two of Irenaeus' fellow travellers, Theodoret and Nestorius, to recapitulate the events of the early 430s in the late 440s and early 450s: see, for example, Smith, *Nicaea*, 127–37, on the need for these new accounts. Further support for writing during first exile comes from the harsh invective against Theodoret discussed by Rusticus at CC 125A, 183A, 206, ACO 1.4, 79, pp. 132–3, 148–9. Open attacks on the bishop of Cyrrhus would be less plausible in the context of Theodoret's outspoken support for the bishop of Tyre against an imperial edict in 448: on which see, for example, Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 182–90. It would also jar with Irenaeus' own public disavowal of Nestorius and pivot to public acceptance of the *Theotokos* at the time of his episcopal appointment: CC 249A, ACO 1.4, p. 181; Theodoret, *ep.* 16, *SC* xcviii. 56–63 (though note the implication that Irenaeus was still critiquing Theodoret's moderate stance). Other possible indications of an early date are Irenaeus' reference to himself in the text as a *comes* (and not an *episcopus*) at CC 277, ACO 1.4, p. 203 and his concern not to reproduce acclamations by the citizens of Hierapolis at CC 275, ACO 1.4, pp. 201–2 because they 'contain many blasphemies against certain people' ('contra aliquos blasphemias ualde multiplices continentes'): a consideration which would have lessened the further we place composition after 435/6.

[62] See n. 59 above.

[63] See, for example, Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 170, 219–21; Beers, 'Avarice', 69; De Leeuw, 'Buying imperial favour', 154.

[64] See n. 61 above.

[65] CC 249A, ACO 1.4, p. 181.

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seen in a missive which Theodoret sent to Irenaeus in 448. Theodoret's letter implies that Irenaeus had picked him up on his inattention to the distinction between the titles of *Theotokos* and *Anthropotokos* and failure to include Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia in a list of church Fathers. In response to Irenaeus' criticisms, the bishop of Cyrrhus pointed out that his colleague in Tyre had also left out *Anthropotokos* and Diodore and Theodore in his preaching.[66] Of course, Irenaeus' criticisms of his colleague (however hypocritical) also suggest the continued significance of a foundational premise – Nestorius as faithful interpreter of Antiochene doctrinal tradition – during his episcopate. This continued commitment to the cause of his deposed ally is likewise suggested by Irenaeus' appointment of another Nestorian sympathiser, Aquilinus, as bishop of Byblus.[67] Such attempts to push the diocese of the East and the wider Church in a Nestorian direction represent a recurring theme of his career. Irenaeus was repeatedly entrusted with, or took upon himself, the role of advocating for the Christological precepts of his ally Nestorius, whether at the Council of Ephesus, in the imperial consistory, or within the diocese of the East. In this regard, Irenaeus cannot simply be regarded as an individual providing a helpful connection to the world of the consistory and the perks of the imperial bureaucracy. Through these attempts to persuade bishops, officials and the emperor, the *comes* was directly involved in debates over the shape of orthodoxy in the Eastern Church in the 430s.

Officials and church politics under Theodosius II

Irenaeus played a recurring role in the formulation of orthodoxy (or, if preferred, Nestorian heresy). This should not be surprising. The significance of aristocratic support in late ancient doctrinal controversy has long been recognised,[68] and numerous studies have stressed the outsized importance of elite patronage in shaping the Church of Constantinople in the first decades of the fifth century.[69] More than that, the unusually

[66] Theodoret, *ep.* xvi, *SC* xcviii. 58–61.

[67] Bevan, 'Theodoret', 81 (as part of a useful discussion of Irenaeus' episcopate at 77–84).

[68] Path-finding studies include P. Brown, 'Pelagius and his supporters: aims and environment', *JTS* xix (1968), 93–114, and E. Clark, *The Origenist controversy: the cultural construction of an early Christian debate*, Princeton 1992, 11–42. K. Bowes, *Private worship, public values, and religious change in late antiquity*, Cambridge 2008, 189–216, provides an excellent synthesis.

[69] See especially Bowes, *Private worship*, 103–24; J. Pigott, 'Capital crimes: deconstructing John's "unnecessary severity" in managing the clergy at Constantinople', in C. De Wet and W. Mayer (eds), *Revisioning John Chrysostom: new approaches: new perspectives*, Leiden 2019, 733–78.

rich documentation for the Nestorian controversy allows us to see the regular involvement of the Eastern imperial state in church politics under Theodosius II.[70] This routine role offered opportunities for particular Constantinopolitan elites and officials to intervene on behalf of their preferred churchmen, ecclesiastical factions and doctrinal positions. The approaches to the court made by the warring councils in the summer of 431 take for granted such an interest in these problems of Christological speculation and ecclesiastical dispute. In his letter back to the Easterners at Ephesus in August 431, Irenaeus noted that various officials were canvassing to be sent to Ephesus to resolve matters (with a strong implication that these were figures sympathetic to Cyril).[71] The count's soundings within court society are echoed by attempts by both parties to gauge and influence opinion within the imperial consistory and bedchamber once they had been summoned by the emperor for talks in Chalcedon that autumn.[72] Even the infamous schedule of 'blessings' offered to key members of the court by Cyril in winter 431 attest to this Christological interest when mapping the patterns of sympathy and antagonism which might require more remunerative forms of persuasion.[73] The bishop of Alexandria identified officials and attendants who could be trusted to try to make a case on his behalf (the *praepositus* Paul, the *tribunus et notarius* Aristolaus, the *cubiculariae* Marcella and Droseria), and those who would need persuading to abandon entrenched views (the *cubicularii* Chryseros and Scholasticius).[74] As Daniëlle Slootjes has neatly put it, Cyril 'tried to leverage a range of relationships – the chamberlain and his assistant, the Augusta and her *cubicularia*, the praetorian prefect and his wife – in order to ensure that arguments in his favour would be made in personal and professional interactions at court'.[75] One of those allies, the *tribunus et notarius* Aristolaus, would in fact be chosen as the emperor's

[70] For a useful synthesis see Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 130–67.

[71] CV 164, c. 5, ACO 1.1.5, p. 136. See n. 56 above.

[72] On these negotiations see Fraisse-Coué, 'Nestorius', 540; Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 204–7; Schor, *Theodoret's people*, 88–9; C. Kelly, 'Rethinking Theodosius', in C. Kelly (ed.) *Theodosius II: rethinking the Roman Empire in late antiquity*, Cambridge 2013, 7–9; Bevan, *New Judas*, 186–93; and Price and Graumann, *Ephesus*, 541–71.

[73] For the schedule from winter 431 (and a cover letter providing an updated version in 432) see CC 293–4, ACO 1.4, pp. 222–5. On these 'blessings' see (from an extensive literature) C. Kelly, *Ruling the later Roman Empire*, Cambridge, MA 2004, 171–81 (with previous work at pp. 285–6 n. 112); D. Caner, 'Towards a miraculous economy: Christian gifts and material "blessings" in late antiquity', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* xiv (2006), 329–77; and most recently Beers, 'Avarice', De Leeuw, 'Buying imperial favour' and Slootjes, 'Dynamics', 257–60.

[74] CC 294, ACO 1.4, pp. 224–5. Such doctrinal intel is also implied by the claim in the *Coptic acts* that representatives of the Church of Alexandria had sought Lausus' appointment to the Council of Ephesus: see n. 25 above.

[75] Slootjes, 'Dynamics', 259.

representative for reconciliation talks between Cyril and John of Antioch the following year; the letters of the bishop of Alexandria indicate a similar trust in his piety and orthodoxy as that expressed by Nestorius and John with regard to Irenaeus.[76] These officials are just some of many who can be spotted in the thick institutional documentation of the controversy expressing particular doctrinal views or showing ecclesiastical allegiances.[77] For all that the interpenetration of Church and State in late antiquity is now taken for granted, there is still a tendency (at least in accounts explaining the course of the Nestorian controversy) to pivot from these official opinions and loyalties to the claims of sharp political practice articulated by its warring factions (and not least by Irenaeus himself). Yet such accusations of corruption and inappropriate lay interference are misleading as a guide to normal practice in church politics. In 430s Constantinople, all parties took for granted the involvement of senators, courtiers, generals and bureaucrats in mediating, advocating and amplifying the doctrinal positions of churchmen.

Irenaeus' contributions to the Nestorian controversy fit within this wider context of elite patronage and official engagement. Yet his commitment to ecclesiastical freelancing also goes beyond these cultural norms. Irenaeus was unusual in continuing these efforts at persuasion past the point at which the emperor and his inner circle seemed amenable to a policy change. In his excellent prosopographical account of the Eastern senatorial aristocracy in a slightly later period, Christoph Begass has stressed the permissive attitude of later fifth- and early sixth-century imperial regimes regarding the range of Christological views and allegiances within their administration. What was less negotiable was the need for the emperor's appointees to adhere publicly to the imperial definition of orthodoxy.[78] Similar features can be seen in the age of Theodosius II and Irenaeus. The Easterners at Chalcedon found that a previously pliable consistory had closed ranks once the decision against Nestorius had been made; Aristolaus was remarkably even-handed in the negotiations of 432–3 once he had received imperial instructions to that end.[79] Irenaeus'

[76] For Cyril's letters to and about Aristolaus see CAth 107, c. 11, ACO 1.1.7, p. 150; CC 196, ACO 1.4, p. 140; CC 293, ACO 1.4, pp. 222–4 (written by his archdeacon Epiphanius); CC 299, ACO 1.4, p. 229; CC 283, ACO 1.4, p. 206; CC 300, ACO 1.4, p. 230. On Aristolaus' role see R. Whelan, 'The imperial official as doctrinal troubleshooter between Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451)', forthcoming.

[77] For example, the *agens in rebus* (and later bishop of Dorylaeum) Eusebius, who wrote an anonymous open letter against Nestorius *c.* 428/429: see, among many accounts, Price and Graumann, *Ephesus*, 93–7 at p. 94 n. 7.

[78] C. Begass, *Die Senatsaristokratie des oströmischen Reiches, ca. 457–518: prosopographische und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, Munich 2018, 405–14.

[79] For closing ranks see, for example, Kelly, 'Theodosius', 8, and Bevan, *New Judas*, 192. For Aristolaus' impartiality see Whelan, 'Troubleshooter'.

marked investment in Nestorius' cause despite increasing imperial hostility also looks odd in terms of wider patterns of elite engagement. Recent work has stressed the asymmetrical relationship between elites and the churchmen who offered them doctrinal and spiritual advice. The latter were not authoritative 'Fathers' chastising their pastoral charges, but rather clients seeking patronage from social superiors happy to turn elsewhere for more amenable guidance.[80] In his much closer ongoing identification with Nestorius, Irenaeus departs from this customary aristocratic hauteur. Part of the explanation may be that we are seeing in the early 430s the beginnings of his later career transition. Recalling the period of the First Council of Ephesus in the *Book of Heraclides*, Nestorius hinted that Irenaeus had already undertaken acts of renunciation and ascetic practices at that time. The erstwhile bishop of Constantinople rebuked his opponents for attacking 'a man who lived in God and served him with his possessions and with his soul and with his body'.[81] It is possible that, like more celebrated aristocratic drop-outs of the early fifth century, Irenaeus combined doctrinal patronage with pursuit of an ascetic lifestyle.[82] Whatever his precise status or source of his commitment, Irenaeus' engagement in ecclesiastical politics remains a fascinating outgrowth of the Christian cultural assumptions of the fifth-century Constantinopolitan elite and palatine bureaucracy. It is this world which allowed an imperial *comes* to become a heresiarch.

[80] For a pithy summary see K. Cooper, *The fall of the Roman household*, Cambridge 2007, 60.

[81] Nestorius, *Book of Heracleides* 1.3, ed. P. Bedjan, in *Nestorius: le Livre d'Héraclide*, Leipzig 1910, 175; trans. G. Driver and L. Hodgson, in *Nestorius: the bazaar of Heracleides*, Oxford 1925, 117. Theodoret likewise praises Irenaeus for his pious conduct in the context of his episcopate in Tyre: *Epistulae* 110, ed. Y. Azéma, in *Théodoret de Cyr: correspondance,* III: *Collection sirmondienne: lettre 96–lettre 147*, *SC* cxi, Paris 1965, 40–1.

[82] Particularly plausible if Irenaeus was in retirement, with his title as *comes* as an honorary position resulting from previous service: see n. 40 above.