

## BOOK REVIEW

## Volker L. Menze, *Patriarch Dioscorus of Alexandria: The Last Pharaoh and Ecclesiastical Politics in the Later Roman Empire*

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Volker Menze presents an account of the rise and fall of Dioscorus that sets aside most discussion of dogma in order to clarify the political, administrative and interpersonal dynamics at work. Dioscorus here is not the extreme proponent of Cyril of Alexandria's orthodoxy who orchestrated the 'robber council' of Ephesus tyrannically and violently. Instead, Dioscorus was a politically naïve and overly sincere administrative reformer who found himself reviled as a scapegoat for his accession to the demands of Emperor Theodosius II. Although all specialists might not be convinced by these commonsensically sceptical readings of conciliar acts and related sources, this engaging and plausibly revisionist retelling of the factional rivalries and power politics between 443 and 454 deserves attention by all interested in the rise of the churches on various sides of Chalcedon.

Dioscorus rose as archdeacon under Cyril of Alexandria, who gained power through the strategic distribution of expensive 'blessings' (or 'bribes', p. 40) to a range of clerics and palace officials (great and small) in Constantinople. Cyril negotiated the palace and church intrigues shrewdly, as seen in the agreement over the 'Formula of Reunion' of 433 between the Alexandrian and Antiochene factions, which left Cyril as the politically ascendant patriarch of the East. Unfortunately for his successors, Cyril left the Alexandrian church deep in debt and likely bankrupt.

Dioscorus was no partisan of Cyril (ironic given his later reputation), but an independently supported 'non-partisan' and 'union leader' who rose to archdeacon during Cyril's illness in 443–444. The precarious financial situation left by Cyril was a driving force in support for Dioscorus among the deacons and priests of Alexandria, a fiscal crisis compounded by credible allegations of corruption against Cyril's extended family and allied deacons. Dioscorus seems to have been welcomed widely within Egyptian circles as someone who could address the fiscal challenges left by Cyril's magnanimous blessings to Constantinople and as someone who was not inclined towards theological controversy beyond Egypt. Although he was concerned with Origenist monks in Upper Egypt, he was only unenthusiastically drawn into disputes over 'Nestorian' theology and the legacy of Cyril's 'Twelve Chapters' in 448.

For all his association with anti-Nestorian polemics and the controversial synod of 449, Dioscorus was not the prime mover in the conflicts, either in the late 440s leading

up to Ephesus II or in the council itself. According to Menze, it was the Emperor Theodosius II who was the major polemical force against the dyophysite bishops and archimandrites who would find themselves on the losing end of Ephesus II, Theodoret of Cyrus, Ibas of Edessa and Flavian of Constantinople. Ephesus II was thus 'Theodosius' pet project', and Dioscorus was but his 'henchman' (p. 111), whose obedience 'reveals a lack of strategic vision' and quickly undermined his standing among fellow bishops because of his allowance of imperial intrusion and violation of canonical rules (p. 120). Dioscorus' lack of vision seems a tragic flaw in his career: he (and others) brought the first Council session to a close without anticipating a second session, which advanced a host of very serious allegations of theological and administrative wrongdoing by Ibas and others, and thus set the stage for a backlash. Yet, the swift reversal of Ephesus II's rulings was not anticipated nor seen as likely by the principal actors at the time, though it has an air of inevitability among later historians who are reading back from the 'black swan' event of Chalcedon (pp. 141–142, 183). Menze casts doubt on ancient accusations of violence and coercion by soldiers and Dioscorus' 'rule of terror' (p. 139); his personality flaw was rather an 'unsophisticated sincerity' (p. 140), and he was turned on by other bishops in the aftermath of Chalcedon as a scapegoat for their own complicity. The catalyst for the rejection of Ephesus II was not a theological revolt but Theodosius' fatal fall off a horse, after which his sister Pulcheria's husband Marcian claimed the spot of Emperor in the east. Pulcheria and Marcian were both motivated to clear the palace (even violently) of Theodosius' loyalists and to mend relations with the elites of the West, especially Pope Leo.

In the Council of Chalcedon of 451, Menze finds little of the dogmatic controversy that dominates many accounts. In his reconstruction of the order of sessions he sees the debate as mainly around canonical procedure and accusations of Dioscorus' mismanagement and abusive behaviour at Ephesus, of which at least some accusations Menze finds 'absurd' (pp. 160–161). Dioscorus made several strategic errors and was hampered by his unwillingness or inability to spread blessings like his predecessor Cyril. Chalcedon notably did not anathematise him as a heretic, but only deposed him from his see for canonical wrongdoing, leaving open the possibility of reconciliation. Dioscorus would be excoriated as a heretic, early on by Pope Leo and later by Justinian (who included him in the heretical lineage of Mani), but this was due to regional politicking and anachronistic projection. Among many in the churches of the East he was remembered not as a theologian (at which he was not skilled) but as a martyr, a 'second Joseph of Arimathea' (p. 195), a righteous voice against Chalcedonian perfidy (under alleged Jewish influence), and a miracle worker.

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