

Isidore and the *Akephaloi*

L. S. B. MacCoull

THE TWELFTH PROCEEDING of the Second Council of Seville (15 November 619), held in the ninth regnal year of the pious Visigothic king Sisebut under the leadership of St Isidore of Seville, records the conversion of a Syrian bishop *ex haerese Acephalorum* to the Nicene-Dyophysite Christological position.¹ Historians have often noted this incident as evidence of the presence of Syrians (usually traders) in Visigothic Spain² and of the strength of the kingdom's Catholic ideology.³ I should like to approach it here from the *Oriens Christianus* point of view: to examine, bearing in mind the nuances of Syriac Monophysite theological argument, just what it was that this

¹PL 84.598D–599B. J. Vives, *Concilios visigóticos e hispano-romanos* (Barcelona/Madrid 1963) 163–185, esp. 171–172.

²E.g. P. D. King, *Law and Society in the Visigothic Kingdom* (Cambridge 1972) 197–198; J. Orlandis, *Historia de España visigótica* (Madrid 1977) 82; J. Orlandis, D. Ramos-Lissón, *Die Synoden auf der iberischen Halbinsel bis zum Einbruch des Islam (711)* (Paderborn 1981) 142 with n.108; J. N. Hillgarth, "The East, Visigothic Spain and the Irish," no. VI in his *Visigothic Spain, Byzantium and the Irish* (London 1985) 444–45; and, for nearby Septimania, E. James, "Septimania and its Frontier: An Archaeological Approach," in *id.*, ed., *Visigothic Spain: New Approaches* (Oxford 1980) 239. However, not all scholars believe in the reality of these oriental traders: J. Arce, "The city of Merida (Emerita) in the *Vitas Patrum Emeritensium* (VIth century A.D.)," in E. Chrysos, I. Wood, ed., *East and West: Modes of Communication* (Leiden 1999) 1–14, esp. 11–14.

³E.g. E. A. Thompson, *The Goths in Spain* (Oxford 1969) 164; King (*supra* n. 2) 130; Orlandis (*supra* n.2) 141; J. N. Hillgarth, "Popular Religion in Visigothic Spain," in James, ed. (*supra* n.2) 10 (= Hillgarth [*supra* n.2] no. I); J. Fontaine, *Isidore de Séville et la culture classique dans l'Espagne wisigothique*² (Paris 1983) II 851.

ecclesiastic (Gregory by name) was represented as having held and may actually have held, what he might have been doing there at that time, and what he was persuaded to accept.

The conciliar text informs us that: *ingressus est ad nos quidam ex haerese Acephalorum natione Syrus, ut asserit ipse, episcopus, duarum in Christo naturarum proprietatem abnegans et deitatem passibilem asserens* (598D). Other than the dubious (to the Westerners) nature of this heretic's episcopal status,⁴ three items in this statement call for discussion: the label of the "Acephali," the "heresy of the Headless Ones"; and the two theological points supposedly made by the man himself, *viz.* denial of the *proprietates* of the two natures in Christ and assertion that the Godhead suffers.

The so-called "Headless Ones" received their sobriquet in the fifth century, when supporters of Peter Mongus, Monophysite patriarch of Alexandria (477–490), refused to follow him in accepting emperor Zeno's *Henotikon* of A.D. 482 (which Peter had in fact helped to draft), thus being left without a head. The term became a derogatory label for Severan Monophysites in both Syria and Egypt in the sixth century.⁵ *Acephaloi* certainly still existed as a group in the seventh century, as the writings of Anastasius of Sinai and George of Pisidia make clear.⁶ The label

⁴As most have read it. "Ut asserit ipse" could also be construed as going with "natione Syrus": the man proclaimed his own ethnic background as Syrian, not (*e.g.*) Egyptian or Armenian (other majority Monophysite nationalities).

⁵A. Papadakis, *s.v.* "Peter Mongos," *OxDictByz* (1991) III 1638; W. H. C. Frend, *s.v.* "Acephaloi," *Coptic Encyclopaedia* (1991) 155. Cf. Thompson (*supra* n.3) 164 with n.2, illustrating Isidore's broad (at his far-removed time and place) interpretation of what the label meant as simply synonymous with "Monophysite sympathizers." By that late date in the far west "headless" had come to mean "heretical party not able to be called after the eponymous label of a known heresiarch" (unlike "Arian," "Manichaeism," and all the rest). See also n.7 *infra*.

⁶*Hodegos* 20 is a dialogue, with appendices, in which an *orthodoxos* refutes an *akephalos* on the subject of the Union: *Anastasioi Sinaitai Viae Dux*, ed. K.-H. Uthemann (= CCGS 8 [Turnhout/Leuven 1981]) 280–283. Cf. A. Cameron, "New Themes and Styles in Greek Literature: Seventh-Eighth Centuries,"

is used at the Seville council simply as a broad synonym for "Monophysite."⁷

The first tenet the Syrian in Seville admitted was "denying the *proprietas* of the the two natures in Christ." *Proprietas* renders Greek *idiotes* or *idioma*, what the Syrian in his own Syriac theological vocabulary would have named *dilayuth*, *dilaytha*, or another derivative of that root.⁸ What is in question is of course the apportioning, according to the definition of Chalcedon, of *proprietas* (Syriac plural *dilayathe*) to each of the two natures, human and divine.⁹ Noteworthy here is that the Latin conciliar text gives a singular *proprietas* construed with the genitive plural *naturarum*. It states that the Syrian bishop denied that after the Union one nature had one *proprietas* and the other another. This is surely a Western Latin misrepresentation of Eastern Monophysite thought in a Semitic language: no actual Monophysite would have said such a thing.¹⁰ The Latin shows

99–100, and J. Haldon, "The Works of Anastasius of Sinai: A Key Source for the History of Seventh-Century East Mediterranean Society and Belief," in A. Cameron and L. I. Conrad, ed., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East I: Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton 1992) 107–147. George of Pisidia (*Against Severus of Antioch* [CPG III 7836: A.D. 638 (?)]) says "Many are the Hydra heads of the Akephaloi ... and even when cut off more heads grow" (lines 64–68): see L. S. B. MacCoull, "George of Pisidia, *Against Severus*: In Praise of Heraclius," in R. Dahood, ed., *The Future of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Turnhout 1998) 69–79, here 72.

⁷For *Acephali* in Isidore's works see J. N. Hillgarth, "Historiography in Visigothic Spain," no. III in his *Visigothic Spain* (*supra* n.2) 294–295, where he remarks that according to Isidore Justinian "accepted the heresy of the Acephalites": see n.26 *infra*.

⁸See R. C. Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies* (Oxford 1976: hereafter CHESNUT) 55–56, Suppl. n.1 on *dilayuth/dilanaytha* vis-à-vis *dilaytha*.

⁹Precisely what Monophysite thinkers avoided doing: Chesnut 55.

¹⁰Chesnut 55–56, with the distinction she indicates in translation between "property" and "propriety": according to Severus of Antioch, "a propriety indicates 'difference' ... the two proprieties in the Incarnation mark off the two levels of reality within Christ" as opposed to "what belongs exclusively to a subject." On "difference" see Chesnut 15–18; L. S. B. MacCoull, "John Philoponus and the Composite Nature of Christ," *Ostkirchliche Studien* 44 (1995) 197–204.

unawareness of the great subtlety attainable by manipulating the triconsonantal root in Syriac. The Spanish ecclesiastics at the council are representing the Syrian as blind to what he, the Syrian, would have regarded with horror as dividing Christ into two identities.¹¹

The second tenet the Syrian is said to have supported was *deitas passibilis*, in Syriac *alhutha hashoshtha*: intended by the conciliar reporter as an assertion of what is termed "Theopaschism." Since the days of Peter the Fuller's addition of "Who was crucified for us" to the Trishagion, Dyophysites had used Cyril's formula "One of the Trinity suffered in the flesh" to depict all Monophysites as Theopaschites after what was to be the pattern of the sixth-century Scythian monks. To Dyophysites all Monophysites were *a fortiori* Theopaschites.¹² The facts are the opposite: Monophysite doctrine proclaimed *deitas non passibilis*.¹³ Our Syrian might well have sung the augmented Trishagion: he would never have confessed anything but that Christ (*Meshiha*) suffered.¹⁴ Clearly all three of the theological strikes against our Syrian, his sect label as an *Acephalus*, his lack of comprehension of the properties of the natures as laid down in the definition of Chalcedon, and his Theopaschism, are the exaggerated products of imperfect cross-linguistic understanding and of biased reporting in Latin by his Western opponents.

This Syrian bishop may, to be sure, have been a member of a trading settlement in the south of the Visigothic kingdom, looking after the spiritual welfare of Syriac-speaking merchants.

¹¹Chesnut 16–17.

¹²Uthemann (*supra* n.6) 265 n. *ad sec.* 29/30; *cf.* T. E. Gregory, "Theopaschitism," *OxDictByz* III 2061.

¹³Theodosius of Alexandria, *Tome to Empress Theodora*, transmitted in Syriac: A. van Roey and P. Allen, edd., *Monophysite Texts of the Sixth Century* (= *Oriental LovAnal* 56 [Leuven 1994]) 28–29 (Syr.) = 46 (Lat. transl.). Also according to Severus: Chesnut 17. Our Syrian might have been a Julianist, but this would have meant only that he believed Christ's body incorruptible.

¹⁴Chesnut 17 with n.1.

However, by the year 619 he may have found himself in Spain for different reasons. First of all, Mediterranean-wide travel by Syrian Monophysites received an additional impetus from their ecclesiastical reunion with the Monophysites of Egypt (with whom they had been at odds) in 616.¹⁵ Second, and more importantly, this reunion had been effected in circumstances of extreme stress: the Persian invasion of Syria.¹⁶ The expansionist Sassanid Persians had taken Damascus in 613 and Jerusalem itself in 614; by 616/7 their authority over Syria was being consolidated, and their occupation of Egypt soon followed. By 619 a Syrian bishop may well have felt that the western end of the Mediterranean was a safer place to be than the eastern.

The East-West struggle was, however, being carried on in the Iberian peninsula as well at just this time. King Sisebut, Isidore's patron,¹⁷ had been carrying on his military push against the Byzantine-held territory between Malaga and Cartagena since 614/5.¹⁸ The Second Council of Seville (cum Synod of Baetica) was called by Isidore primarily to deal with considerations of territorial and administrative upheavals brought about by this very war against the Byzantines. Since Malaga had just been recaptured by the Visigoths, its bishop, Theodulf, was present at the council, and the first proceeding is taken up with his trying to recover the former dependencies of his see in the aftermath of the war (*PL* 84.593CD). Other proceedings deal with problems clearly the result of the war and its confusions: irregular ordinations and equally irregular depositions; unlawful marriages by

¹⁵D. Olster, "Chalcedonian and Monophysite: The Union of 616," *BSAC* 27 (1985) 93–108.

¹⁶For chronology *cf.* J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century* (Cambridge 1990) 42–43. The emperor Heraclius' military response to the Persians did not get under way until 622.

¹⁷For his regnal ideology see G. C. Miles, *The Coinage of the Visigoths of Spain* (New York 1952) 27, 260–272 (epithets *Iustus*, *Pius*, *Victor*); Hillgarth (*supra* n.7) 285–288 for his interaction with Isidore.

¹⁸Thompson (*supra* n.3) 162–163, 332–334.

clerics; runaway church freedmen; laymen taking control of monasteries; monasteries forced to move; nuns without male supervision (595B–598C). These measures describe the unsettled situation in which our Syrian bishop had found himself. The authority of the king and Isidore would have tried to ensure that foreign heterodoxy in the south did not constitute one more problem to vex officials already concerned with church jurisdiction, administration of the sacraments, and the settling of scores.

What happened to this man, far from his war-torn home at the edge of another war zone and surrounded by ecclesiastics of militantly Dyophysite convictions? “Although testimonies of the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ were brought before him and the sayings (*sententiae*) of the holy Fathers were read to him,” says the conciliar text, “he long continued to hold fast to his *communio* despite these salutary warnings” (598D–599A).¹⁹ The word *communio* may well imply that he was not the only Syrian Monophysite on Isidore’s turf. As it turned out, though, *gratia divina edoctus*, Gregory finally reversed himself on all three points: “he abdicated his own heresy, and confessed both the two natures and the one person in our one-and-the-same Lord Jesus Christ, believing that the nature of the Godhead is impassible²⁰ and that in the humanity alone did He undergo the weaknesses of the Passion and the Cross” (599A). He then confirmed his new faith with an oath “and appeared purged of all his former errors,” to which the conciliar reporter adds the pious hope that he will remain so (599B).

¹⁹Note the phraseology of *salutaribus monitis*, recalling the bidding to the Lord’s Prayer in the Mass, as it took varied shape in the seventh century: M. C. Díaz y Díaz, “Literary Aspects of the Visigothic Liturgy,” in James (*supra* n.2) 64. Vives (*supra* n.1) 171 emends *retinens* to *renitens*.

²⁰Note the difference from the previous phrase *deitatem passibilem*: here we have *impassibilem naturam deitatis*. This is of course perfectly tenable for any Monophysite believer: cf. Chesnut 17 with n.1 citing Severus of Antioch’s *Letter* 65. It is only the *duasque naturas et unam personam* that is outright Chalcedonian.

The next proceeding of the council, number 13, is a careful and exhaustive presentation of those "testimonies and *sententiae*" by means of which our Syrian was persuaded to see the light.²¹ The formulation is deliberately designed "to refute those heretics who in their madness confuse (*confundant*) the two natures of Christ after the Union, and assert that in Him the substance of the divinity is passible" (599B).²² The Nicene-Chalcedonians wish to demonstrate *in una persona Christi geminae naturae proprietatem* (note that singular again, opposed to *gemma*²³ [not *duo*]). Thereupon follows a credal passage in high scholastic style, backed up by four columns of biblical citations from both Testaments designed to prove the self-evident obviousness of two natures.²⁴ Then come the patristic passages: as given in the conciliar text, they are from Hilary, Ambrose, Athanasius, Gregory (unspecified: Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa are conflated, see below), (Ps.-)Basil, Cyril of Alexandria (both Letters to Succensus, and the exegesis of the two birds [Leviticus 14.49–51] from his Scholia on the Incarnation),²⁵ Augustine, Pope Leo's Letter to Flavian, and Fulgentius of Ruspe. It has been shown that Isidore, the compiler of this

²¹PL 84.599B–608A: analyzed by J. Madoz, "El florilegio patristico del II Concilio de Sevilla," *Miscellanea Isidoriana* (Rome 1936) 177–220.

²²Here we have another subtle variation from the earlier *passibilis deitas: passibilem divinitatis substantiam*. In Syriac *sub-stantia*, *hypo-stasis* is *qnoma*, *natura/physis* is *khyana*. It is not clear if some differentiation between *deitas* and *divinitas* is being intended here. However, again, no Syrian theologian would ever have asserted such a thing as is here stated in Latin.

²³So again in 599C below. The council likewise intended to show that the Passion was *in sola humanitatis susceptione* (599B), a thoroughly Chalcedonian phrase.

²⁴E.g. Ps. 45.1–2, "My heart is inditing of a good matter," indicates the divinity, "Thou art fairer than the children of men" the humanity; and Isaiah 9.5, "Unto us a child is born," means the humanity, "a son is given" means the divinity (PL 84.600AB).

²⁵See J. A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy* (Leiden 1994) 328–331. Oddly enough, "Cyrillus Alexandrinus" does not appear in the indices to Fontaine's *Isidore* (*supra* n.2).

florilegium or catena, drew on the theological writings and edicts of the emperor Justinian in putting his materials together: specifically on his *Confessio rectae fidei adversus tria capitula* made in 551 for the Constantinopolitan Council of 553.²⁶ The authorities are both western and eastern, with the eastern coming in a chunk sandwiched in the middle.

It has been stated that this florilegium cites the authorities in the same, for the most part chronological, order as they occur in the (Justinianic) source:²⁷ but matters are not quite so tidy as they have been made out to be. In Seville II Cyril (*PL* 84.605BC) comes after "Gregory" (604D–605A), *i.e.*, in chronological order, whereas in Justinian (*PL* 69) "Gregory the Theologian" (238D–240A) comes in between two citations from Cyril (*Ad Succensum* 1 and 2 [234B–236A] and the Leviticus scholion [240C]), while then another Cyril passage immediately follows. Then comes Basil, then another Gregory Theologus passage (240D), and then Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra Eunomium* in 242AB. Isidore (*PL* 84) appears to conflate the two Gregories all in one section, citing "Gregorius" *To Celedonius* 604D–605A, his *De Filio* in 605A.2–7, and then *ipse (sic!) Contra Eunomium* in 605A.7–14. Justinian is not as strong on Latin fathers as is Isidore (he does cite Augus-

²⁶CPG III 6885; E. Schwartz, ed., *Drei dogmatische Schriften Iustinians*² (Milan 1973) 72–111; Hillgarth, "The Position of Isidorian Studies," no. IX in his *Visigothic Spain* (*supra* n.2) 850: the imperial theology as reported by Pope Vigilius probably from a Latin version prepared in Constantinople (*PL* 69.234–244; *cf.* PG 86.3.993–1035). This source analysis seems at odds with the implications of Hillgarth's (originally 1970) statement on "Isidore's verdict that Justinian ... was a heretic," (*supra* n.7) 297 with 293–295): Isidore used a pro-Three Chapters, anti-Justinian North African source; Justinian's Council of 553 was not accepted by the Spanish church (297 n.149). *Cf.* Hillgarth's comment on A. Cameron, "Byzantium and the Past in the Seventh Century: The Search for Redefinition," in *The Seventh Century/Le septième siècle* (London 1992) 271–272. No reference to "Iustinianus" is made in Fontaine's indices either.

²⁷Hillgarth, "Position" (*supra* n.26) 850. See the discussion of the florilegium for the council of 553 by A. Alexakis, *Codex Parisinus Graecus 1115 and Its Archetype* (*DOStudies* 34 [Washington 1996]).

tine), and does not cite Fulgentius (who lived out of his realm, in Vandal-ruled Africa) at all.

The proceeding closes with the assertion that “we have brought these things forth to be inserted into our decrees *demonstrantes geminam carnis et deitatis*²⁸ *naturam in una Domini et Salvatoris nostri persona*” (607B–608A). The conciliar text continues with the fully Chalcedonian gloss *passum ... in ea natura quae corporis est, non passum in ea natura quae deitatis est* (608A). Here it is *natura, khyana*, that the Syrian would have initially objected to. One wonders just what was the form of words of the oath he took (Trinitarian? by the *salus* of the king?) when matters were concluded.²⁹

This whole latter exposition has the interest of being an anti-Monophysite polemic formulated not in Constantinople but in the far west, in Latin, at quite a remove from the struggles being carried on by Heraclius and Patriarch Sergius I to come to terms (by means of the monoenergist and monothelete doctrines) with Monophysites in the eastern empire. The confrontation in Spain was an unequal one, with the participants talking plainly at cross-purposes.³⁰ For a student of the Christian Orient it is interesting to examine how strange Syriac-language beliefs (calqued from Greek) appeared in the West to people used to thinking in Latin. Isidore, a bishop concerned to bring normality back to his diocese thrown into such confusion by his king’s war against the Byzantines, would not have seen in a stray Syrian prelate anything but one more easterner whose opinions sounded far different from what he could accept. The Syrian, doubly caught between the fallout of the Persian-Byzantine and

²⁸Note *caro et deitas*, not *humanitas et deitas* or *caro et verbum* to reflect a Cyrillian *sarx-logos*.

²⁹On oaths see King (*supra* n.2) 41–43; *cf.* 139–140 for oaths taken by Jews converting to Christianity. However, Vives (*supra* n.1) 171 brackets the word *iureiurando*.

³⁰We can be sure that Isidore did not know Syriac: Hillgarth, “Position” (*supra* n.26) 853 with n.79.

Visigothic-Byzantine wars, is being represented as “the other” whose terminology came from a world the westerners did not understand. A closer than usual look at this text shows how valuable it can be occasionally to re-read a Western source with Eastern eyes.³¹

November, 1999

Society for Coptic Archaeology
(North America)
haflele@imap4.asu.edu

³¹I am grateful to the Hayden Library Interlibrary Loan service, to Monica Blanchard of the Institute of Christian Oriental Research, Catholic University, and to Kent Rigsby for help with references.