

RELATIONSHIPS OF POWER IN THE SIXTH CENTURY CE SYRIAN RELIGIOUS MILIEU

BACKGROUND

John of Ephesus and Severus of Antioch were non-Chalcedonians in a world that sometimes victimized their faith. Their writings promote their convictions, but hidden in the stories of non-Chalcedonian miracles is data about power relationships between holy men, bishops, monks and the laity. Michel Foucault argues that "power is everywhere," and this is true of sixth century Syria. In three anecdotes: a holy man saves his village from famine but struggles with monks' power when he wanted monkhood honors; the laity disobey the orders of their bishop; monks commit violence to set firm boundaries about their in-group. That's all to say, power was everywhere.

ANECDOTE 1
IN: LIVES OF THE EASTERN
SAINTS
JOHN OF EPHESUS

The Plot: In an unnamed village, an old man goes to a monastery, where he asks for the tonsure. The monks argue with him, and he leaves to live on the boundary of the village. After 8 years of ascetic living, the man saves the village by praying for hail to go away.
Analysis: Monks were expected to provide for the elderly and poor (Crislip, 2008). The monks instead reject the old man. Why? The old man claimed power by requesting the special hair cut of the tonsure. The tonsure was a symbol of monastic power. Monks used exercised power by keeping strict communities (like limiting who received tonsure) and defining what it meant to be Christian (Sizgorich, 2014).

ANECDOTE 2
LETTER TO THE BELIEVERS
AT ANTIOCH
SEVERUS OF ANTIOCH

The Plot: While Severus of Antioch is in exile in Egypt, he writes to his congregation in Antioch and warns them to take only the non-Chalcedonian Eucharist. He says those who take the Chalcedonian Eucharist will have the depths of their souls blackened.
Analysis: The ability to claim power over the laity required the legitimization of that power by the laity (Grey, 2011). Through the care of the poor, bishops won their affection and power. The laity chose to support those bishops who offered the greatest care and patronage, and their collective support swayed local politics (Brown, 1992). Power was reciprocally shared.

ANECDOTE 1
IN: ECCLESIASTICAL
HISTORY
JOHN OF EPHESUS

The Plot: In Constantinople, a "band of robbers" interrupts non-Chalcedonian services. They ransack the church and imprison churchgoers. The Chalcedonian Bishop Eutychius questions some of the imprisoned laity about their faith.
Analysis: Many groups are claiming power. The laity claim authority by attending non-Chalcedonian church in a Chalcedonian city. Eutychius has power; bishops exercised their power by both creating peace and inciting violence (Kahlos, 2013). Monks likely performed the robbery, and violence for monks set boundaries and defined authority (Sizgorich, 2014). The laity had choices in responding to violence.