

2 Blessings, Bribes, and Bishops: Cyril of Alexandria, the Council of Ephesus (431), and the Making of Orthodoxy¹

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Introduction: Gifts, Bribes, and Blessings in the Later Roman Empire

At the very end of Antiquity Pope Gregory the Great (590–604) claimed ‘that in the churches of the East no one is promoted to holy orders unless with the gift (*datio*) of bribes (*praemiorum*)’.² Here *datio* is not an innocent gift but a pecuniary reward in exchange for promoting a clerical candidate who thereby advanced his social status (and income).³ With Constantine’s conversion almost 300 years earlier and his sponsorship of the Christian Church the range of offices that were attractive to men with ambitions expanded.⁴ Particularly episcopal offices became positions of respect and influence, and were therefore also subject to fierce competition and strife. In order to increase their chances of ordination, episcopal candidates therefore also took recourse to ‘simony’, that is, to be ordained in exchange for a payment.⁵

The extensive epistolary corpus of Gregory indicates that simony was a major issue towards the end of the sixth century.⁶ However, it was not a new problem as already the fourth-century *Canons of the Apostles* explicitly forbade simony and threatened clergy who ordained someone for money with deposition (*can.* 29).⁷ This sentence was picked up by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 which was the first ecumenical council to tackle simony (*can.* 2):

If any bishop should perform an ordination for money and put on sale the grace that cannot be sold, and ordain for money a bishop, *chorepiscopus*, presbyter, deacon [...] the one who has attempted this, if convicted, endangers his own rank, while the person ordained is to benefit nothing from his purchased ordination or promotion but is to be deprived of the dignity or responsibility which he obtained for money.⁸

However, simony not always appeared as simple as the canon assumes but could take various shapes that ranged from a rather general lobbying for someone's cause to a straightforward bribe.

In the time of Pope Gelasius (492–6), a certain Eucharistus wanted to be elected bishop of Volaterra and asked Faustus, a *defensor*, to spend money on his election campaign.⁹ This might have been a common, otherwise unattested, procedure but in Eucharistus' case documentation survives because he charged Faustus of misappropriating his money. Faustus, however, could prove that he spent the money on supporters of Eucharistus, reimbursement of expenses to voters, as well as defending Eucharistus against legal charges of forgery and parricide.¹⁰ Sometimes a gift may have appeared harmless but the intentions were not as a case of simony in the time of the sixth-century patriarch Severus of Antioch (512–18) shows: 'for they say that the bribe [*šūkdâ*] was concealed under the name of a blessing [*būrktâ*] by those gain-hunters, and it deceived them'.¹¹ Obviously, clerics may have simply pretended not to understand the meaning of a gift they received in order not to be accused of simony.

Justinian (527–65) legalized to some extent the widespread phenomenon of customary gifts in exchange for ordination. In 546, the emperor decreed that episcopal candidates were not allowed to offer gifts, pledges, or other illegal incentives in order to be elected but he allowed that successful candidates would pay consecration fees. The language of *Novella* 123 only thinly veils the venality of episcopal offices by speaking of *consuetudinibus* ('customary perquisites') and *intronisticis* ('enthronement fees').¹² In other words, by the sixth century, access to ecclesiastical offices took *grosso modo* the same development as imperial administrative offices for which money 'became a more important currency of access'.¹³ This was a concession to the realities of the Later Roman Empire which the Church as an institution could not evade. However, conforming to the material norms of Late Roman society caused problems of justification. An ideology that preached poverty as an ideal and promised salvation in another world had to adapt to the fact that the Church as an institution had become one of the richest and most influential protagonists in the world.¹⁴

Therefore, wealth and abundance were redefined in Christian terms, and particularly in monastic circles—the professional poor of Christianity—as 'holy wealth' became not only accepted but even praised.¹⁵ The donations of imperial aristocrats (who were most likely responsible for the wealth of the monasteries in the fifth and sixth centuries) were reinterpreted as gifts of God—'blessings'—as the origin of all material wealth. Thereby the traditional ideology of gift-exchange in the Greco-Roman world was transformed into a Christian framework in which God became the true donor who gave blessings at his discretion.¹⁶ This Christian reinterpretation of material wealth developed particularly from the fifth century, and helped Christian professionals to "spiritualize" their wealth and formulate moral explanations for a full range

of economic circumstances'.¹⁷ In fifth-century Egypt Shenoute's monks made proud use of the material abundance they received as blessings in order to feed the poor.¹⁸ In the sixth century, Cyril of Scythopolis reported that Theodosius, a monk in Palestine, would not accept any gifts offered directly to him but the *illustris* Acacius buried 100 *solidi* in his cave and, after his return to the Constantinople, regularly sent Theodosius blessings in gold.¹⁹

The wealth of the Church as well as the development of the 'miraculous economy' of ecclesiastical institutions through blessings did not remain unnoticed by 'secular' authorities. Chrysaphius, the powerful eunuch at the court of Emperor Theodosius II (408–50), requested blessings from bishop Flavian on the occasion of the latter's ordination as bishop of Constantinople. The bishop innocently understood this as spiritual blessings (the traditional Christian *eulogiai* brought for church service), and sent him loaves but the eunuch clarified that he expected *eulogiai* of gold.²⁰ Aware of the Christian redefinition of a blessing, Chrysaphius abused the concept, and his request can be considered extortion—probably a more common phenomenon than our sources allow us to trace.

The fluidity of the terminology and the question what could legitimately be called and constitute a 'blessing' as opposed to a 'bribe' also played a role in one of the crucial moments of late antique ecclesiastical history. In what follows, the lavish material gifts that Cyril, patriarch of Alexandria (412–44) bestowed on the Constantinopolitan court after the Council of Ephesus (431) shall be discussed.²¹ In the short run these gifts secured Cyril's victory in the power struggle with his colleague John of Antioch, and in the long run they facilitated the acceptance of Cyril's theology as the cornerstone of 'Orthodoxy' for the Church of the Empire—as well as for most Christian denominations until today.

Cyril's Gifts: 'Blessings' and Gold

Several allegations of 'bribery' stem from the time in the immediate aftermath of the Council of Ephesus but one instance of a detailed catalogue of gifts that Cyril sent in summer of 432 from Alexandria to Constantinople has to be singled out. Cyril would have preferred to keep this a secret as Peter Brown observed: 'we were not supposed to know about this incident at all—for the information relating to it was "leaked" by opponents of the main protagonist'.²² The leaker was *comes* Irenaeus, a friend and ally of Nestorius whom Cyril had deposed as patriarch of Constantinople (428–31) at the Council of Ephesus and condemned his teaching.²³ Irenaeus' polemical work *Tragoedia* is unfortunately lost but the Roman deacon Rusticus translated an abbreviated account of the documents used by Irenaeus into Latin in the sixth century. This extensive collection of documents, primarily letters, survives in the

Collectio Casinensis.²⁴ Despite the anti-Cyrrillian bias of the documentation, the texts offer rare insights into fifth-century ecclesiastical politics and their mechanisms.

Three texts from the *Collectio Casinensis* matter here: a) a short fragment of a letter to an unknown recipient—most likely a cleric (as the recipient is referred to as *sanctitate* and *religiositate*), b) a letter by Cyril's archdeacon Epiphanius (who was in charge while Cyril was indisposed) to Maximianus, patriarch of Constantinople (431–4), and c) the catalogue of gifts in kind and gold that accompanied Epiphanius' letter and must have been drawn up by Epiphanius as well.²⁵ The catalogue appears to be a summarized copy from a cargo document for the actual shipment, not an accounting document of what the Church of Alexandria supplied for Cyril's cause overall.²⁶

Epiphanius sent the letter and the list to Maximianus just after the gifts had been dispatched. Nevertheless, the mail may have been carried by a faster vessel to Constantinople and easily reached Maximianus before the gifts made it to the capital. At the end of the letter Epiphanius states that Cyril had written a letter to his trusted clerics in Constantinople at the same time as the shipment left Alexandria, most likely sent by different mail to alert them of the arrival of the goods (and to probably distribute tasks to them). The catalogue contains a list of seventeen to nineteen (mostly named) courtiers and the lists of which gifts they were to receive. Maximianus was the linchpin of Cyril's clerical network in Constantinople, a well-connected cleric who was able (and requested) to directly approach the courtiers. Cyril had a clear understanding of the mechanisms at court as well as good knowledge of personal (religious) allegiances of individuals. The chamberlains (*cubicularii*, but also the *cubiculariae* as well as the confidants of the *cubicularii*) were clearly a main target of Cyril as they were the personal servants of the emperor (and empress) and his closest confidants at court. However, via a certain Ammonius, maybe the *comes rei privatae* (the senior fiscal official of the emperor responsible for the imperial estates) or the *comes sacrarum largitionum* (the imperial finance minister), Cyril probably even promised emperor Theodosius a good share of the gold.

The gifts are broken down in two categories—gifts in kind (textiles and furniture) and gold—serving different functions. Twice it is noted that the gifts in kind should work as a 'door opener': one courtier was supposed to receive more gifts than the preceding recipient in order to cease opposing Cyril, and another recipient's gifts are introduced as tool so that he 'should think in our favor'.²⁷ It therefore seems likely that the textiles and furniture were considered 'customary suppliant blessings' (*eulogiae consuetudinariae supplices*) as the catalogue noted at one point.²⁸ The Latin translation uses here the same terminology that we find in Justinian's *Novella* 123 (*consuetudinibus*), and also Augustine of Hippo (395–430) used it to describe acceptable 'grease payment' to state

officials (*per tolerabilim consuetudinem*).²⁹ These ‘blessings’ were ambiguous gifts as they were neither selfless presents nor did they trigger an automatic repayment for Cyril. They were intended to build up a moral obligation for the recipients to consider Cyril’s cause in more favourable terms than before.³⁰

The nature of the gift in gold was different as its delivery was in most instances tied to written conditions. For example, after the first recipient’s gifts in kind are listed, Epiphanius added: ‘and in order that he would help us in the cause about those matters which were written to him: fifty pounds of gold’.³¹ For another courtier Epiphanius stipulated ‘if he shall have acted in accordance with what was written to him by the most magnificent Aristolaus – with the lord Claudianus intervening as mediator – and helped us: two hundred pounds of gold’.³² In other words, there had been previous communications (partially via Cyril’s emissaries in Constantinople) between the Church of Alexandria and the courtiers in Constantinople. The gold now shipped to Constantinople marked the last part of negotiations between Cyril and courtiers who had agreed or at least shown some disposition to support Cyril in exchange for gold.

The gold mentioned in Epiphanius’ letter and the attached catalogue totaled 2580 Roman pounds: 1500 pounds of gold was promised to Ammonius, and another 1080 pounds physically present and ready to be given to the listed individuals at court. 2580 Roman pounds are c.836 kg, taking a Roman pound to be around 324 g. Supposing a gold price of USD 1900 per ounce (in April 2022), Cyril would have spent the equivalent of c.USD 50 million today.³³ As discussed elsewhere, Cyril must have spent decades of ordinary savings of the Church of Alexandria, and most likely depleted Alexandria’s liquid assets.³⁴

Cyril’s ‘Blessings’: Their Timing and Incentives

Considering the enormous costs for the Church of Alexandria and the meticulous care with which Cyril put his network to work at court, it is necessary to inquire into the reason and Cyril’s motivation. Why did Cyril desperately need support? And why did he initiate the shipment of gifts to Constantinople at this stage of the controversy in summer 432?

In spring 432 it was already obvious that the emperor had dropped his former bishop Nestorius and the eastern bishops—who were largely supporters of Nestorius—could not do anything about it. However, Cyril’s problem was something else as he pointed out in a letter to Rabbula of Edessa:

While it was appropriate that they [the eastern bishops] agree to what was proper and anathematize the wicked teachings of Nestorius, according to the intention of the most pious emperor

and all of the orthodox, on the other hand they seek to render void everything which was written by me either in pamphlets or in books. In this way, they say, the churches will be in communion with each other.³⁵

The eastern bishops proposed to come to terms based on the Council of Nicaea and allowed as additional material Athanasius' letter to Epictetus but discarded all further dogmatic material *vel per epistulas vel per capitula*.³⁶

This explicitly targeted Cyril's *Twelve Chapters*, the twelve anathemas that Cyril had appended to his third letter to Nestorius in 430.³⁷ John of Antioch's counter-council, the *conciliabulum*, at Ephesus declared Cyril's *Twelve Chapters* to be heretical because they proposed teachings of Arius, Apollinarius, and Eunomius.³⁸ After Ephesus, regional synods in Antioch and Tarsus did the same and Epiphanius' letter pointed out that the eastern bishops requested Cyril to withdraw his *capitula*.³⁹

According to Epiphanius' letter the eastern bishops had at this moment (late summer 432) not yet condemned Nestorius and it seems very likely that they expected Cyril's retraction of the *Twelve Chapters* in exchange for their subscription to the deposition of Nestorius and the condemnation of his teachings. After meeting with Aristolaus and reading Theodosius' *sacra*, John of Antioch knew that he would be unable to defend Nestorius. He sent Paul of Emesa to Alexandria for face-to-face discussions in which an agreement on the deposition of Nestorius and the anathematization of his teachings was undoubtedly conditioned on Cyril's retraction of his *Twelve Chapters*.⁴⁰ John could show his good will to reunite the Church but Cyril's concession would also give him the public victory he hoped for.⁴¹

Cyril must have anticipated John's tactic and realized how critical the situation was for his embattled *Twelve Chapters*. Epiphanius' urgent requests to Maximianus, his sophisticated allocation of bribes in Constantinople, and the very fact that Cyril looted Alexandria's treasury underline the seriousness of his concern. It was not about Nestorius' deposition and the anathematization of his teachings but about Cyril and his involvement in the Nestorian controversy. Would Cyril appear immaculate as a suffering confessor who brought down Nestorius, or as the radical opponent of Nestorius, whose own theology was questionable or even heretical as some Easterners believed? After all, the emperor had agreed to Cyril's deposition before and Cyril also knew that insisting on an official acceptance of his *Twelve Chapters* would cause a public outcry. Therefore the instructions and letters that were sent to the courtiers, accompanied by the gold, probably requested their recipients to propose that no party was allowed to make any further request to the other party. To an outsider this might even appear as if Cyril lowered the bar for an agreement and any courtier could readily support such a

moderate and reasonable proposal. However, this way, Cyril outmaneuvered John and left him empty-handed while achieving all his own goals: Nestorius was deposed and his teachings anathematized, and therefore by default, Cyril's Council of Ephesus was to be accepted as orthodox (which included in its acts Cyril's third letter to Nestorius with Cyril's *Twelve Chapters*).⁴²

The negotiations continued for months and John at some point agreed to Nestorius' deposition but would not anathematize his teachings. However, in February 433 Cyril felt confident enough to send John an ultimatum.⁴³ Cyril's political shrewdness had outwitted John who finally signed the *Reunion of 433* between Alexandria and Antioch. The letters of communion included a largely dyophysite statement that had originally been composed by the eastern bishops for the emperor in 431.⁴⁴ Therefore, John cannot have hesitated to agree to this, but in exchange for subscribing to Nestorius' deposition and anathematizing of his teachings, his goal had been to receive Cyril's signature under a retraction of his *Chapters*. However, this eastern request was off the table once Cyril's ultimatum reached Antioch and it is difficult not to directly link this development to Cyril's shipment of 'blessings' and gold to Constantinople.⁴⁵

Cyril's Gifts: Blessings and Payments = Bribes

In capitalist economies, the payment of money for goods or services is a daily business transaction. Not all of these payments are official in the sense that in exchange for money we also receive a receipt together with the goods or services. Tipping the waiter in a restaurant is not only accepted but also expected to supplement for the waiter's (low) income. It does not constitute a bribe but ideally rewards good service that is also in the interest of the waiter's principal, the restaurant owner. However, slipping a bill to the *maitre d'hôtel* in a restaurant in order to expedite the seating affects others who wait for a table as well. Therefore, in a 'Friends' episode depicting such a situation, Monica requested that Chandler 'be smooth about it' because slipping a bill to the *maitre d'hôtel* should be done in secret so that no one else notices it.⁴⁶ We may not immediately consider this a bribe but it can be regarded a standard case of bribery: it a) constitutes an 'alienation of agency' as the *maitre d'hôtel* should act in the interest of the restaurant and seat parties according to their reservations or time of arrival, and b) it is done in secret.⁴⁷ The *maitre d'hôtel* acts no longer as trusted agent but according to his own financial interests—and may therefore be called corrupt. He abuses his position for personal gain and not according to his duty and responsibility.⁴⁸

In recent years the validity of the term 'corruption' for pre-modern societies has been questioned. When scholars (and lawyers) today

categorize a deed as ‘corruption’ and/or ‘bribery’, would Romans have perceived it the same way?⁴⁹ Throughout history ‘grease payments’ and/or complimentary gifts facilitated or sped up routine tasks undertaken by state bureaucracies and they would not necessarily constitute a bribe in a given context or society.⁵⁰ They were not secret and were often even socially accepted as privileges that bureaucrats enjoy(ed) in pre-modern but also modern societies.

Christopher Kelly has detailed the instances in which late Roman bureaucrats could expect a payment or other compensation for their services.⁵¹ Cyril’s gifts in kind seem to have fallen into this category as Epiphanius’ note concerning the ‘customary blessings’ almost certainly refer to them. However, how shall we understand the term ‘blessings’ (*benedictiones/eulogiae*) here? Walter Beers rightly noted that Cyril’s ‘blessings’ were ‘not disinterested gifts’ and therefore the usage of the term *eulogia* ‘becomes a rather disingenuous euphemism’.⁵² The fact that it was Cyril’s opponents who leaked the details of these lavish ‘blessings’, suggests that the Easterners (and probably other contemporaries as well) were appalled by Cyril’s behaviour and perceived the ‘blessings’ in the very same way as scholars today—as bribes!

It may nevertheless be worth taking Cyril’s (or Epiphanius’ for that matter) terminology serious and considering what Alexandria shipped as ‘blessings’ to Constantinople (and even referred to as *virtute eulogiarum*).⁵³ The blessings consisted largely of domestic textiles and furniture and can most likely be considered luxury goods: fleece carpets, cushions, table cloths, draperies, covers for stools, doors, and chairs, large curtains or veils, but also ivory stools and chairs as well as *tabulae, persoina* (see below), and ostrich eggs.⁵⁴ Sumptuous Egyptian textiles are well attested for Late Antiquity and Alexandrian décor textiles may have been sought after in Constantinople.⁵⁵ Maybe even more prestigious were Alexandrian ivory chairs and stools as ivory was (next to gold and silver) the luxury material *par excellence* in Antiquity and Alexandria one of the centres of ivory workshops.⁵⁶ The ivory tablets of the ambo of Henry II (1014–24) in Aachen most likely stem from a late antique Alexandrian (ecclesiastical?) ivory throne and it has been argued that also the most famous late antique piece of ivory furniture—the ivory throne of bishop Maximianus of Ravenna (546–56)—was produced in Alexandria.⁵⁷

At a time when the rich indulged in an ‘iconography of abundance’, as Peter Brown aptly phrased it, the courtiers may have picked some of Cyril’s luxury gifts otherwise unavailable in Constantinople in order to upgrade their interior decoration through pieces of exquisite material and exotic design.⁵⁸ The old furniture and textiles could have been re-used as gifts for their clientele like in the Italian TV-series *Gomorra* Donna Immacolata gives away her sofa to a loyal foot soldier of her husband, the local boss of the Camorra.⁵⁹ In other words, Cyril’s

gifts—if displayed—reinforced the recipients' social status as being sought-after luxury goods.

The fact that the recipients of Cyril's 'blessings' all received similar gifts, albeit in different quantities, however, argues against the items all being used domestically. It would also not explain Epiphanius' terminology of 'blessings'. Walter Beers has compared Cyril's gifts to Melania the Younger's gifts when she visited the court of emperor Honorius (395–408): the saint supposedly brought the eunuchs 'ornaments, such as rings, silver and silken garments'.⁶⁰ It is very obvious that the 'ornaments' (κόσμητα) here are personal luxury goods—jewellery and garments.⁶¹ This is in stark contrast to Cyril's 'blessings' which contain no jewellery or clothes, or any other personal or personalized luxury good. It seems that all of Cyril's gifts in kind could be offered as 'blessings' to churches, hospitals, or monasteries. *Tabulae* could of course mean tables but maybe it refers here to panels (as possible decoration in a church), *persoina* from the Persea-tree might literally have been a blessing for the sick, and the ostrich eggs may not only have been an exotic addition to a courtier's home decoration but could also have been considered a valid blessing for any church.⁶² Therefore, Cyril seems to have sent gifts in kind that had a 'dual-use': if the courtiers wished, they could utilize them in a domestic context but Cyril could always claim that he had sent them blessings in the literal sense that could/should be donated to ecclesiastical institutions.⁶³

The relationship between the gifts in kind and the gold is not always fully clear-cut as Epiphanius twice summarily refers to 'worthy blessings' (*benedictiones dignae*) including both gifts in kind and gold.⁶⁴ However, in the catalogue, gifts in kind and gold are always separated: the gifts in kind were delivered as 'customary blessings' upfront, the gold only if the courtiers fulfilled written agreements. Considering that Cyril had several emissaries in Constantinople, the recurring element of written agreements remains surprising. Scholars have noted that already the catalogue of gifts made the donor vulnerable to accusations of bribery if leaked—as happened later.⁶⁵ In other words, was this an oversight by Epiphanius who obviously was in charge as long as Cyril was ill? Should this be attributed to Epiphanius' inexperience in handling a very delicate matter? Possibly. However, considering the repeated references to written instructions and agreements with, or pledges by, courtiers throughout the catalogue and the fact that Cyril clearly had written to them about these matters (and what he expected from them), it seems rather intentional.

If this is the case, it might also be the case that legal contracts between the courtiers and Cyril (or the Church of Alexandria) had been issued. *Codex Theodosianus* II.29.2, a law from 394, stipulates that those who have petitions (*desideria*) and ask for patronage (*suffragium*), were legally obliged to fulfill their contract (*sponsio*) when the other party has

fulfilled their patronage.⁶⁶ In Late Antiquity the term *suffragium* usually refers to patronage in obtaining offices but the legal side is not that different here as also Epiphanius requested the courtiers to be patrons for Cyril's cause.⁶⁷ More precisely, as the courtiers only interceded on Cyril's behalf in exchange for gold, the courtiers were not traditional *patroni* but should rather be considered 'brokers'.⁶⁸ In fact, a Medieval Latin-Greek glossary defined *suffragium*—besides the classical meaning of 'voting'—as (a 'decree of') 'payment'.⁶⁹ Such a contractual arrangement may appear odd initially but it actually makes sense for Cyril to have had the courtiers' agreement for their *suffragium* on record. The proof of such contracts would immediately free him from charges of illegal interference and the enormous sums he paid would even prove how much he was willing to invest in 'Orthodoxy'!

Epiphanius also pointed to the *avaritia* of the courtiers and it might also have become a custom among court officials to expect payments for approving ecclesiastical decisions. The general tax-exemption of the Church remained untouched but government officials could receive their (what they certainly believed, fair) share of ecclesiastical wealth. Particularly in the case of Ammonius, it may have been that once Cyril approached him in this matter, the *comes* dictated Cyril the price he had to pay for the emperor's support.

Must the conclusion therefore be that there was no bribery, in contrast to what scholars have concluded so far? From Cyril's perspective the answer would be 'yes', as the gifts in kind were 'blessings' that the recipients supposedly could donate to charitable church institutions, and the gold was a legal transaction for the courtiers' brokerage. However, I assume this line of defense was only Cyril's precaution to prepare for the worst-case scenario if he were caught. Even if Cyril meticulously ensured that his transactions remained within legal limits *suffragium* already had a disreputable overtone.⁷⁰

To summarize, Cyril's gifts ultimately should be considered bribes because they were:

- a Absolutely beyond the customary norm of what might constitute a 'grease payment'. Theologians might argue that 'Orthodoxy' is priceless but the evaluation of the 836 kilograms of gold shows that Cyril spent more gold than he possibly saved during his tenure as patriarch;
- b Clearly an 'alienation of agency' as they did harm another party, the Easterners, who could have expected a more favorable treatment by the court without Cyril's gifts. Finally,
- c They were most likely given in secret. Even if written contracts were issued, no party involved had an interest to publicize them. The courtiers simply hid their gold at home and a luxurious ivory chair embellishing a courtier's chamber would not prove anything.⁷¹ It is

notable that although Cyril wrote numerous letters to courtiers (who in return must have written to Cyril or his trusted clerics and pledged their support), none of them who had agreed to *suffragium* publicized their agreements. Therefore either a ‘Nestorian’ supporter among the Constantinopolitan clergy or Maximianus (or his successor) leaked the letter and the catalogue in order to damage Cyril’s reputation.

Conclusion: Bribes, Orthodoxy, and Sainthood

The politically observant reader of Epiphanius’ letter and catalogue cannot fail to draw a comparison to one of the largest political corruption scandals in recent years that erupted 2018 in Argentina.⁷² Oscar Centeno, the chauffeur of Roberto Baratta, former senior official in the Argentinian Planning Ministry, had kept ‘notebooks of corruption’ that cover precise information of the times, location, license plates, value, and weight of the bags of money he delivered around Buenos Aires.⁷³ Eight of these spiral-bound notebooks which detailed the delivery of bribes of over USD 50 million (according to Centeno’s estimation) were leaked to an Argentinian newspaper, *La Nacion*, and copies given to the federal prosecutor. They cover the years 2005 to 2015 but miss out the years 2011, 2012, and 2014, and the prosecutor believes the total sum might be up to USD 160 million.⁷⁴ However, Centeno’s deliveries did not pay off: the detailed record compromised the secrecy of the payments and, following their publication, numerous high ranking bureaucrats, politicians, and even a judge have been charged with corruption.

In contrast, Cyril’s blessings were well-spent funds so that even modern scholars have vigorously defended Cyril’s bribery as if he did it for the common good. Lionel Wickham argues that the ‘hostile dossier which records the transaction criticizes, by malicious exposure, the size, not the fact, of the payment. The bankrupting size is the sincerest testimony to Cyril’s wish for a united Church and should, in fairness, bring him credit’.⁷⁵ However, a united church would have been possible without depleting Alexandria’s ecclesiastical funds had Cyril been willing to retract the *Twelve Chapters* that infuriated the eastern bishops (as Wickham actually points out).⁷⁶ The heart of the political quarrel came down to the question of what each side surrendered for subscribing to a renewed communion.

Ecclesiastical protagonists could probably never completely escape the institutionalized mechanisms of venality but Cyril proactively made use of the courtiers’ *avaritia* for his own ends. He Christianized the terminology, veiled his gifts as ‘blessings’, and rebranded the economy of venality in Christian terms.⁷⁷ He may have legalized the payment of gold via contracts for *suffragium* so that even the hostile publication of his bribery did not prevent the success of the transaction. It proves Cyril’s

ability as ingenious politician even though his personal and public triumph ultimately prevented a theologically sound agreement that could have become the basis for a unified Church. In economic terms, Cyril's Return on Investment certainly paid off. Already shortly after his death, the *Reunion of 433* was considered to be Cyril's theology; John accepted and followed it.⁷⁸ The *Twelve Chapters* became authoritative in the sixth century and the Fifth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 553 judged other theologians and their texts accordingly. What the Easterners had regarded in 430 to be heretical theology became a cornerstone of Orthodoxy in almost all Church traditions and the supposedly immaculate Cyril is even canonized as a saint today. Therefore, in the *longue durée*, Cyril's gifts proved to be one of the best investments in ecclesiastical history and more than a ruthless politician can usually expect even for a lavish bribe of around USD 50 million.

Notes

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- 2 Gregory the Great, *ep.* 11.28; *S. Gregorii Magni Registrum Epistularum Libri VIII–XIV, Appendix.* ed. Dag Norberg (Turnholt, 1982), 916; *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, trans. John R.C. Martyn, (Toronto, 2004), 773.
- 3 On the difficulties of defining 'gift' see Valentin Groebner, *Liquid Assets, Dangerous Gifts: Presents and Politics at the End of the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2002), 1–14 and Felicity Heal, *The Power of Gifts: Gift-Exchange in Early Modern England* (Oxford 2015), 3–30.
- 4 See the introduction in Tim W. Watson, 'The Rhetoric of Corruption in Late Antiquity', PhD-thesis University of California/Riverside (2010).
- 5 The term 'simony' is a reference to Simon Magus who recognized the power of the apostles' 'laying of hands' and offered Peter money for receiving the same power (*Acts* 8:9–24). For the problem of simony see Peter Norton, *Episcopal Elections 250–600. Hierarchy and Popular Will in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2007), 177–91; Sabine Huebner, 'Currencies of Power: The Venality of Offices in the Later Roman Empire', in *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity*, ed. Andrew Cain and Noel Lenski (Burlington, VT, 2009), 167–79.
- 6 Several of his letters are concerned with the sale of ecclesiastical offices but Gregory is not consistent with his terminology (*datione, ambitus, praemia, solidis* etc.). Martyn, *Letters of Gregory*, 84 lists the respective letters in the footnotes.
- 7 Norton, *Episcopal Elections 250–600*, 181 points out that also 'the rush of laymen into orders' caused simony, and the Church attempted to forbid newly baptized members to immediately become bishops; Council of Serdica *Can.* 10; see also here *Can.* 2.

- 8 Council of Chalcedon, *Can. 2; Acta Cconciliorum Oecumenicorum* II.1.2, ed. Eduard Schwartz (Berlin, 1933), 354; *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, Vol. 3, trans. Richard Price and Michael Gaddis (Liverpool, 2005), 94. The council even remembered in another session that John Chrysostom as bishop of Constantinople (398–403) had deposed more than a dozen bishops in Asia Minor because they received their offices through simony; Council of Chalcedon XII.58; ACO II.1.3, 411; see also Palladius, *Dialogue on the Life of John Chrysostom*, XV. One of the charges against Ibas of Edessa at the Council of Chalcedon was actually that ‘he took payment for ordinations’ (Session XI.73.3, ACO II.1.3, 383).
- 9 Justin Taylor, ‘The Early Papacy at Work: Gelasius I (492–6)’, *Journal of Religious History*, 8 (1975), 326.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 326.
- 11 Severus of Antioch I.48, in *The Sixth Book of Select Letters of Severus, Patriarch of Antioch*, vols. 1.1 and 1.2, ed. and trans. E. W. Brooks (London, 1902–3), 145–6 (trans. 131–2); Daniel Caner, ‘Towards a Miraculous Economy: Christian Gifts and Material “Blessing”’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 14 (2006), 357–8.
- 12 *Corpus Iuris Civilis. Vol. 3: Novellae*, ed. Rudolf Schoell (Berlin, 1895), 597; *The Novels of Justinian: A Complete Annotated English Translation*, trans. Peter Sarris and David J. D. Miller (Cambridge, 2018), 804–5; see also Christopher Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge, /Mass., 2004), 163–4 and Sabine Huebner, ‘Currencies of Power’. See discussion of this law N-N.
- 13 Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire*, 138.
- 14 See Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, 2012). However, Bernard Flusin, ‘Bischöfe und Patriarchen. Die Strukturen der Reichskirche’, in Luce Pietri (ed.), *Die Geschichte des Christentums Vol. 3. Der Lateinische Westen und der Byzantinische Osten* (Freiburg, 2001), 537, rightly cautioned that the increase in landholding did not necessarily mean more revenues and income for individual churches. For the financially difficult situation of the church of Alexandria see below.
- 15 See Ariel Lopez, *Shenoute of Atripe and the Uses of Poverty: Rural Patronage, Religious Conflict, and Monasticism in Late Antique Egypt* (Berkeley, 2013), esp. 46–72.
- 16 See Caner, ‘Miraculous Economy’.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 371.
- 18 Lopez, *Shenoute of Atripe*, 46–72.
- 19 Kyrillos von Skythopolis, ed. Eduard Schwartz (Leipzig, 1939), 238.
- 20 Theophanes Confessor AM 5940: the historicity of this incident cannot be verified; see also Caner, ‘Miraculous Economy’.
- 21 I use the term ‘gifts’ throughout when generally referring to Cyril’s shipment to Constantinople as somewhat more neutral than ‘blessings’ and ‘bribes’. The terminology will be discussed in the subchapter ‘Cyril’s Gifts: Blessings & Payments = Bribes’, N-NN.
- 22 Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, 1992), 15.
- 23 *PLRE* II.624–5: ‘Irenaeus 2’; see also Fergus Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire: Power and Belief under Theodosius II (408–450)* (Berkeley, 2006), 168–82; Walter F. Beers, “‘Furnish Whatever is Lacking to Their Avarice’: The Payment Programme of Cyril of Alexandria”, in Nicholas S. M. Matheou,

- Theofili Kampianaki, and Lorenzo M. Bondioli (eds.), *From Constantinople to the Frontier. The City and the Cities* (Leiden, 2016), 68–69.
- 24 ACO I.4, praefatio; *Cyril of Alexandria. Select Letters*, ed. and trans. Lionel R. Wickham (Oxford, 1983), xliii–xlvi; Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, Appendix A, esp. 239–40.
 - 25 ACO I.4, 222–25 (numbers 292, 293, 294); trans. in *St. Cyril of Alexandria. Letters 51–110*, trans. John I. McEnerney (Washington, D.C., 1987), 147, 151–3 (Letters 94, 96), 188–92 (Appendix 4); note also Caner’s discussion: Caner, ‘Miraculous Economy’, 352–3. The first to discuss these letters *en détail* was Pierre Batiffol, ‘Les Présents de Saint Cyrille a la Cour de Constantinople’, *Bulletin d’ancienne littérature et d’archéologie chrétiennes*, 1 (1911), 247–64; see now especially Beers, “‘Furnish Whatever is Lacking’.”
 - 26 Contra Beers, “‘Furnish Whatever is Lacking’”, 77, 80. An accounting document would need to include at least the 1500 pounds of gold for Ammonius. On this see N–NN.
 - 27 ACO I.4, 224; *St. Cyril of Alexandria. Letters 51–110*, McEnerney, 153.
 - 28 The terms for blessings are either *eulogiae* or *benedictiones*.
 - 29 For the *Novella* see N–NN; Augustine, *ep.* 153; Migne, *PL* 33, 664. ‘Customs’ and ‘traditions’ of gifts are often very flexible: Groebner, *Liquid Assets*, 27–35.
 - 30 If any of the recipients saw a danger in accepting these gifts (or if any of them rejected Cyril’s gifts) remains unknown but unlikely as late antique courtiers expected them; for the discussions in as much gift in kinds or fees can be considered bribes, see Heal, *Power of Gifts*, 196–204; for the late Roman court Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire*.
 - 31 ACO I.4, 224; *St. Cyril of Alexandria. Letters 51–110*, McEnerney, 151.
 - 32 ACO I.4, 224; I modified McEnerney’s translation: *St. Cyril of Alexandria. Letters 51–110*, McEnerney, 151–2.
 - 33 The purchasing power of gold in Late Antiquity versus today might distort this ‘equivalent’ in dollars, but this is a sizeable amount of money by any standards. In addition it only takes into account the amount of gold clearly specified, while bishop Maximianus was still expected to chip in for the common good.
 - 34 For the extraordinary value which stripped Alexandria of its liquid funds, see Volker Menze, *Patriarch Dioscorus of Alexandria: The Last Pharaoh and Ecclesiastical Politics in the Later Roman Empire* (forthcoming in 2023).
 - 35 Cyril *ep.* 34; ACO I.4, 140; *St. Cyril of Alexandria. Letters 1–50*, McEnerney, 136–7.
 - 36 ACO I.4, 93. Athanasius’ letter to Epictetus did play a role at the final stages of the agreement.
 - 37 Throughout the *Collectio Casinensis* Cyril’s *Twelve Chapters* are referred to as *capitula*.
 - 38 ACO I.4, 36–7; see also McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, 94–5. For Cyril’s explanations on the *Twelve Chapters*, drawn up in Ephesus in 431, see ACO I.1.5, 15–25; trans. in McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, 282–93.
 - 39 Adam M. Schor, *Theodoret’s People: Social Networks and Religious Conflict in Late Roman Syria* (Berkeley, 2011), 91; see also Cyril *ep.* 33; ACO I.1.7, 147–50; written in 432 as Aristolaus’ mission is mentioned. Again, this most likely refers to the *Twelve Chapters*. In this long letter, Cyril again defended himself against accusations that he might be an Apollinarian, Arian or Eunomian, proving his troubles.
 - 40 For Paul’s mandate by John see Cyril *ep.* 36; ACO I.1.4, 6–7.

- 41 Not the least in order to pacify his colleagues who sided with Nestorius.
- 42 It is debated among scholars if the letter with the appended *Twelve Chapters* was actually read out at Ephesus; McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, 83–4 rightly points out that ‘Cyril could ensure no better defense of the Chapters than to have them endorsed by the council Fathers’.
- 43 Cyril, *ep.* 37, ACO I.1.7, 154; *St. Cyril of Alexandria. Letters 1–50*, McEnerney, 143.
- 44 ACO I.1.7, 69–70; Cyril *epp.* 38, 39; Graham Gould, ‘Cyril of Alexandria and the Formula of Reunion’, *The Downside Review*, 106 (1988), 235–52 and Torsten Krannich, ‘Cyrill von Alexandrien und die Unionsformel von 433 n. Chr.’, *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum*, 9 (2005), 572–3. Hans van Loon, *The Dyophysite Christology of Cyril of Alexandria* (Leiden, 2009) argues that Cyril’s language did not change as it was already largely Dyophysite before 433. The *mia physis* formula appears only three times before the reunion in his writings.
- 45 For a more detailed chronological reconstruction see Menze, *Patriarch Dioscorus of Alexandria*.
- 46 *Friends* Season 7, episode 10, ‘The Holiday Armadillo’. In contrast to Chandler, Richard would of course know how to ‘tip’ the *maitre d’hôtel*!
- 47 See for example Kendall D’Andrade, ‘Bribery’, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 4.4 (1985), 241–2.
- 48 James Weber and Kathleen Getz, ‘Buy Bribes or Bye-Bye Bribes: The Future Status of Bribery in International Commerce’, *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 14 (2004), 695–711 with previous scholarship; see also John R. Danley, ‘Toward a Theory of Bribery’, *Business & Professional Ethics Journal*, 2.3 (1983), 26.
- 49 On the question of what constitutes ‘corruption’ in general see Oskar Kurer, ‘Definitions of Corruption’, in Paul M. Heywood, *Routledge Handbook of Political Corruption* (London, 2015), 30–41. A useful guide to use and limitations of the term ‘corruption’ can be found in John Kleining and William C. Heffernan, ‘The Corruptibility of Corruption’, in William C. Heffernan and John Kleining, *Private and Public Corruption* (Lanham, MD, 2004), 3–22. See also the introduction in Ronald Kroeze, André Vitória and Guy Geltner, *Anti-Corruption in History: From Antiquity to the Modern Era* (Oxford, 2017).
- 50 Thomas L. Carson, ‘Bribery, Extortion, and “The Foreign Corrupt Practices Act”’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 14.1 (1985), 68, 79–80. Today, however, this perception has changed and companies have to be more cautious to even avoid the impression that they could have paid state officials.
- 51 Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire*, 138–85.
- 52 Beers, “‘Furnish Whatever is Lacking’”, 73.
- 53 ACO IV.1, 222.
- 54 For a detailed discussion of the pieces see Menze, *Patriarch Dioscorus of Alexandria*.
- 55 See for example Landesmuseum Württemberg, *Die koptischen Textilien im Landesmuseum Württemberg* (Stuttgart, 2014), available online, but also several other museums (including Berlin and Trier) have collections of ‘Coptic’ textiles. For the quality of late antique Egyptian goods see in general Martin von Falck and Friederike Lichtwark, *Ägypten. Schätze aus dem Wüstensand. Kunst und Kultur der Christen am Nil* (Wiesbaden, 1996), here for example the famous wood relief of the liberation of a city, 132–3; see also the discussion in Pierre du Bourguet, ‘Textiles, Coptic’, in Aziz S. Atiya (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1981), vol. 7, CE 2210b–2230b, and

- Marie Hélène Rutschowskaya, 'Woodwork, Coptic', in Atiya (ed.), *Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, CE 2325b–2347b.
- 56 Johannes Kollwitz, 'Elfenbein', in: *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, 4 (1959), 1106, 1117–19.
- 57 Hendrik Breuer, 'Antike Götter und ein byzantinisches Marienlob. Die spätantiken mythologischen Elfenbeine der Kanzel Heinrichs II. im Dom zu Aachen', *Analecta Coloniensia*, 5 (2005), 171–8; for the suggestion that it might have belonged to a patriarchal throne, 177. E. Baldwin Smith, 'The Alexandrian Origin of the Chair of Maximianus', *American Journal of Archaeology* 21 (1917), 22–37; however, for an overview of the *status questionis* concerning the origin of the chair (Alexandria, Constantinople or Ravenna) see Kollwitz, 'Elfenbein', 1129–31 and Deborah Mausekopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2010), 214–18.
- 58 Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 197–9, referring here to the western rural aristocracy.
- 59 *Gomorra – La serie* I.1: "Il clan dei Savastano", 12:44–13:20. Those of Cyril's gifts for which the courtiers had no need themselves, they could also regift as high-value gifts to their equals.
- 60 Beers, "Furnish Whatever is Lacking", 72; *The Life of Melania the Younger: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, trans. Elizabeth Clark (New York, 1984), 35.
- 61 See also Socrates *HE* I.12.5: the κόσμος here seems to refer to jewellery.
- 62 For *tabula* as panel see *Liber Pontificalis* 72.2 and 75.4; *Gesta Pontificum Romanorum: Liber Pontificalis*, Vol. 1, ed. Theodor Mommsen (Hannover, 1898), 170, 180; *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis): The Ancient Biographies of the First Ninety Roman Bishops to AD 715*, trans. Raymond Davis (Liverpool, 1989), 62, 66. Batiffol assumes a table like the one on the mosaic of San Vitale at which Abraham feeds the three angels; Batiffol, 'Les Présents de Saint Cyrille', 260 n. 6. For ostrich eggs in churches see George Galavaris, 'Some Aspects of Symbolic Use of Lights in the Eastern Church Candles, Lamps and Ostrich Eggs', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 4.1 (1978), 69–78. For further discussion of the 'blessings' see Menze, *Patriarch Dioscorus of Alexandria*.
- 63 Epiphanius' comment, however, concerning the greediness (*avaritia*) of the courtiers makes obvious that the sender had no illusions about the recipients' intentions. For the few examples for church inventories that also include cloths, (door) curtains, chairs, stools etc. see Maria Mundell Mango, *Silver from Early Byzantium. The Kaper Koraon and Related Treasures* (Baltimore, 1986), 263–4; also W.E. Crum, *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the Collection of the John Rylands Library Manchester* (Manchester, 1909), 112–14, 117–19.
- 64 Obviously gold always makes a good 'blessing' for the Church which could use it to feed the poor.
- 65 Beers, "Furnish Whatever is Lacking", 81 suggests that the document could also have been collated later.
- 66 *Theodosiani Libri XVI cum Constitutionibus Sirmondianis et Leges Novellae ad Theodosianum Pertinentes*, ed. Theodor Mommsen and Paul M. Meyer (Berlin 1905), 120–1; the law also survives in the *Codex Iustinianus* IV.3.; see G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, 'Suffragium: From Vote to Patronage', *British Journal of Sociology*, 5.1 (1954), 39; Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, 391–401. 'Sponsio' here has not the classical legal meaning 'Bürgschaft' but refers to a more general 'contract' or 'formal agreement'. See also Max Kaser, *Das römische*

- Privatrecht II. Die nachklassischen Entwicklungen* (Munich, 2nd ed. 1975), 457 n. 2.
- 67 For the development of *suffragium* in Late Antiquity see De Ste. Croix, 'Suffragium'; Ramsay MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome*, 265n.85 and Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire*, 293–4n.79; *suffragium* was not always used for obtaining offices; see Jens-Uwe Krause, *Spätantike Patronatsformen im Westen des Römischen Reiches* (Munich, 1987), 61.
- 68 Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire*, 161; Krause, *Spätantike Patronatsformen*, 58–65. Cyril's *suffragium* (if it indeed happened) constituted a business transaction, and did not make Cyril a client of the courtiers in Constantinople.
- 69 *Corpus Glossariorum Latinorum*, Vol. 2, ed. Georg Goetz (Leipzig, 1888), 191 reads for *suffragium*: 'ψηφοφορία, δόγμα δόσις' which is either faulty Greek for δόγμα δόσεως or δόγμα and δόσις are separated entries; de Ste. Croix, 'Suffragium', 48 argues that '*suffragium* is defined as δόσις: a gift, payment or bribe'; also Detlef Liebs, 'Ämterkauf und Ämterpatronage in der Spätantike', *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte Romanistische Abteilung* 95 (1978), 164n.15 reads only δόσις (as 'Gegenleistung'). The original compilation may date back to the sixth century. For the change in meaning see also Justinian's *Novella* 8 (535 CE) discussed by Liebs, 'Ämterkauf und Ämterpatronage in der Spätantike', 161–4: Justinian reproached the 'so-called' *suffragium* which basically equals payment for an office.
- 70 See Liebs, 'Ämterkauf und Ämterpatronage', 173, 176.
- 71 For hiding the gold at home see the story of the eunuch Scholasticus: ACO I.4, 85.
- 72 Although small in comparison to the 'Lava Jato'-operation/'Odebrecht-scandal' in Brazil in which maybe around 800 Million USD of bribes throughout numerous South American countries changed hands.
- 73 The details about the years that the notebooks cover vary as well as the estimated amount of money; see for example Demian Bio, "'Notebooks of Corruption': Two Plea Bargains and Marci's Cousin to Admit Involvement", *The Bubble* 6 August 2018 (www.thebubble.com/notebooks-of-corruption-roundup/); Daniel Politi, 'Bags of Cash in Argentina: Driver's Notes Propel Corruption Inquiry', *New York Times* 3 August 2018 (www.nytimes.com/2018/08/03/world/americas/argentina-corruption-investigation.html); Nicole Anliker, 'Kirchner und die fatalen Notizbücher eines Chauffeurs', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 24 August 2018 (www.nzz.ch/international/notizbuecher-mit-politischer-sprengkraft-ld.1414456).
- 74 See Anliker, 'Kirchner und die fatalen Notizbücher'. Agustino Fontevecchia, 'Of Notebooks and Dollars: Corruption in Kirchner's Argentina', www.forbes.com/sites/afontevecchia/2018/08/23/of-notebooks-and-dollars-corruption-in-kirchners-argentina/#4c4d7c4431f2 speaks of even up to 200 million USD.
- 75 *Cyril of Alexandria*, Wickham, xxv.
- 76 *Cyril of Alexandria*, Wickham, xxxvi–xxxvii.
- 77 As later also visible in Severus of Antioch; see N–NN.
- 78 See the Council of Constantinople in 448 at the first session of Chalcedon: I.342 with reference to I.246 (ACO II.1, 121 and 107–11); see also *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, Vol. 1, trans. Richard Price – Michael Gaddis (Liverpool, 2005), 196n.216.