

Volker Menze – Kutlu Akalın

*Kann man Bücher verbrennen?*  
Severus of Antioch's Letter to Nonnus Scholasticus,  
a Heretical Codex, and a Late Roman *Autodafé*<sup>1</sup>

*Sie sterben eines natürlichen Todes. Sie sterben,  
wenn ihre Zeit erfüllt ist. Man kann von ihrem  
Lebensfaden nicht eine Minute abschneiden,  
abreißen oder absengen. Bücher, das wissen wir  
nun, kann man nicht verbrennen.*

Erich Kästner, "Kann man Bücher verbrennen?  
Zum Jubiläum einer Schandtät", 9. Mai 1947<sup>2</sup>

Erich Kästner, poet, pacifist, and acclaimed author of children's books, was one of the authors of "un-German" literature whose books were burned on May 10, 1933 by the new German student "elite" in several German university cities. In the evening of this Thursday, Joseph Göbbels, Germany's minister of propaganda, publicly condemned Kästner along with many other writers while the author stood in the audience at the Opernplatz in Berlin, and witnessed the *autodafé* of his own books.<sup>3</sup> Kästner wrote those lines 14 years later, after the end of World War II, in a German newspaper to remember this "apokalyptische Volksfest" (apocalyptic fair) as he phrased it. Although the attempts of burning books have a longstanding and shameful tradition in institutions such as churches, states and universities alike,<sup>4</sup> Kästner apodictically states that books can only die a natural death: books

- 1 The work for this article was made possible through a research grant of the German Research Foundation (DFG), and we are very grateful to the DFG for the financial support. It is also a pleasure to thank Sebastian Brock (Oxford) for invaluable comments on the introduction, text and translation as well as Cristian Gaspar (Budapest) and Luk van Rompay (Durham) for comments on the introduction. Mona Körte (Berlin), Claus Maywald (Mainz) and Jürgen Weber (Weimar) enlightened us about difficulties in burning books, and Jürgen Tetzner (Münster) provided us with literature on ignition temperatures. Mistakes, however, can only be credited to us; Kutlu Akalın is responsible for text and translation, Volker Menze for the introductory article.
- 2 "They die of a natural death. They die, when they have fulfilled their time. No one can cut, rip or singe off a single minute from their thread of life. Books – we know this now – cannot be burnt." Erich Kästner, *Über das Verbrennen von Büchern*, Zürich: Atrium 2012, 11.
- 3 *Autodafé* as term referring to burning books is more common in French and German, and therefore used as loanword here, understanding burning (heretical) texts as public spectacle.
- 4 Kästner himself refers to the history of book burning – down to Tacitus – in his reflections on 1933: Kästner, *Über das Verbrennen von Büchern*, 14f. For the history of book burning see for example the somewhat dated but instructive overview by Frances E. Hammitt, "The Burning of



do not burn! While Kästner meant the intellectual destruction of a book,<sup>5</sup> not the factual burning of one copy of it, eye-witness' reports from 1933 also indicate that the latter may be more difficult than one might expect: "Although their linen- and paperback-covers had been ripped off as precautionary matter, the books did not burn well. Petroleum was time and again needed to support the burning."<sup>6</sup> It seems that scholars in the humanities at times underestimate the difficulties to successfully undertake an *autodafé*!<sup>7</sup>

The problem if a book actually burns when thrown into the flames lies also at the heart of the text being discussed here.<sup>8</sup> Severus, the former non-Chalcedonian patriarch of Antioch (512–518), having been condemned together with his writings at the council of Constantinople in 536 wrote this letter shortly before his death in 538 in his exile in Egypt. The letter describes how Chalcedonians entered a monastery, confiscated a book of Severus, and unsuccessfully tried to burn it – interpreted by the non-Chalcedonians as a miracle. Thereby it offers a rare glimpse of how regional and local officials implemented the decision of an ecclesiastical council and the enforcement of the subsequent imperial legislation. It is an irony of history that this letter – written by a "heretic" according to imperial legislation – should have been burned but survived the times, and came down to us to report the imperial measures concerning its own destruction.

The article offers a short introduction to the historical context, the author Severus and book burning in the Roman world before the letter is discussed more in detail, its value for the broader picture of the religious controversy and persecutions in the sixth century and the question of how to understand the "miracle". At the end, text and translation will be presented.

Books", *The Library Quarterly*, 15.4 (1945), 300–312; in recent years, the topic of biblioclasm became en vogue; see for book burning Haig Bosmajian, *Burning Books*, Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland & Company 2006, grandiosely claiming to have written the first comprehensive overview of book burning from antiquity to the twentieth century. See also Hermann Rafetseder, *Bücherverbrennungen. Die öffentliche Hinrichtung von Schriften im historischen Wandel*, Vienna: Böhlau 1988; in addition, in recent years a good number of studies on the destruction of libraries have appeared as well.

- 5 Although Hammitt, "The Burning of Books", 308f reports that actually a few book burnings have proved successful in eliminating texts.
- 6 "Obwohl man vorsorglich ihre Leinen- und Pappeinbände entfernt hatte, brannten die Bücher nicht gut. Man mußte immer wieder Petroleum zu Hilfe nehmen."; Ernst Ottwalt, "In diesen Tagen [1936]" in: Klaus Schöffling, *Dort wo man Bücher verbrennt. Stimmen der Betroffenen*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1983, 99.
- 7 See the note in Mona Körte/Cornelia Ortlieb, "Formen des Buchgebrauchs in Literatur, Kunst und Religion. Eine Einführung", in: eadem, *Verbergen, Überschreiben, Zerreißen. Formen der Bücherzerstörung in Literatur, Kunst und Religion*, Berlin: Erich Schmidt 2007, 9–30, here 12 n. 12 which initiated the idea for analyzing the technical questions of how books can be burned.
- 8 Sebastian Brock told us in a personal communication that he had actually prepared and sent in an edition and translation of this letter to Nonnus to *Oriens Christianus* some thirty years ago. However, the text was lost and no further copy existed. A short piece of this letter has already appeared in translation in Volker Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008, 135.



### a) A Post-Chalcedonian World

The council of Chalcedon convened in 451 in order to settle the disputes around the divine and human natures in Christ, divided eastern and western Christianity for centuries to come. In the wake of the council, the second half of the fifth, the whole sixth and the beginning of the seventh centuries were a period of doctrinal struggles and controversies that shook the foundation of the Eastern Roman Empire.<sup>9</sup> Whereas the West adhered to the formula of faith introduced at Chalcedon, the Christians in the East at least partially resisted fiercely. Eastern Roman Emperors attempted to deal rather unsuccessfully with the opposing Christian groups for more than a century and a half.

Officially the Eastern Roman Empire – the only Roman empire still existing at this time – became Chalcedonian with the accession of emperor Justin I in 518. After reaching a union with the papacy, the eastern bishops were requested to sign a papal statement of faith which emphasized the primacy of Rome over all other sees in the *oikumene*.<sup>10</sup> For obvious reasons, this letter was opposed not only by non-Chalcedonian but also by eastern Chalcedonian bishops alike – especially the patriarch of Constantinople who could not envision himself as underling to Rome. However, in the end, a compromise among the Chalcedonians could be reached and only the non-Chalcedonian bishops remained stubborn, preferring exile to defecting from their faith. Among the more than 50 bishops who left for exile was also one patriarch, Severus of Antioch, who had not only been a highly influential advisor for the previous emperor Anastasius (491–518) but can certainly be regarded as one of the most important theologians of Late Antiquity.

### b) Severus of Antioch

In a recent article Lucas van Rompay noted that the twentieth century had been a good century for Severus.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the last century was the first that, on a scholarly level, did justice to this great theologian and bishop by seeing most of his extant works being published. Still, some of Severus' writings have come to light only throughout the last few decades, and have only recently been published or still await publication. These comprise especially translations in other languages

9 For Chalcedon, see the excellent introduction and translation in *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, trans. Richard Price and Michael Gaddis, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2005; for a brief overview of the post-Chalcedonian struggles see Volker Menze, "Chalcedonian Controversy", *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2012, 1428–31.

10 Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church*, 56–105.

11 Lucas van Rompay, "Severus, Patriarch of Antioch (512–538), in Greek, Syriac, and Coptic Traditions", *Journal of Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 8 (2008), 3–22, here: 3; for Severus in general see especially Pauline Allen and C. T. R. Hayward, *Severus of Antioch*, London and New York: Routledge 2004.



than Syriac – the language in which most of Severus' texts have survived although the patriarch himself spoke and wrote in Greek.<sup>12</sup>

Severus was born in Pisidia in 465 into a pagan family and studied in Alexandria and Berytus before he converted to Christianity, and was baptized at the end of the 480s. After his conversion, Severus became a monk in southern Palestine that at this time was a stronghold of non-Chalcedonianism.<sup>13</sup> Severus' opposition to the Council of Chalcedon determined most of his life, and in 512 he was instituted as patriarch of Antioch. For the next six years the patriarch tirelessly worked for the non-Chalcedonian cause, and in some of his letters it can be seen that he hoped for a bright non-Chalcedonian future.<sup>14</sup>

Severus regarded himself as the successor of the great Alexandrian patriarchs, Athanasius (328–373) and of course Cyril (412–444).<sup>15</sup> His theological abilities at least matched those of the two Alexandrian patriarchs, and like them, he was the leading – not to say dominating – theological protagonist of his time. His influence on the Christological discourse of the sixth century was far reaching, not the least because Severus was a particularly productive author.<sup>16</sup>

Severus' works comprises several genres, especially dogmatic treatises and polemics, homilies and letters. From the period before his episcopate, Severus' main dogmatic work in which he defended the non-Chalcedonian point of view against Chalcedon is the *Liber contra impium grammaticum*, addressed against the Chalcedonian John the Grammarian.<sup>17</sup> Further dogmatic works include his *Ad Nephalium*, Severus' earliest dogmatic work, and his *Ad Sergium Grammaticum*, in which Severus explains a fellow non-Chalcedonian the correct non-Chalcedonian Christology.<sup>18</sup>

12 See for example most recently the Coptic translation of a letter by Severus: Jitse Dijkstra and Geoffrey Greatrex published a Coptic ostrakon: "Patriarchs and Politics in Constantinople in the Reign of Anastasius (with a Reedition of *O.Mon.Epiph.* 59)", *Millennium* 6 (2009), 223–264.

13 See in general Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and Aryeh Kofsky, *The Monastic School of Gaza, Vigiliae Christianae* Suppl. 78, Leiden: Brill 2006; for Severus see Kathleen M. Hay, "Severus of Antioch: An Inheritor of Palestinian Monasticism," *Aram* 15 (2003), 159–171.

14 For Anastasius see most recently Mischa Meier, *Anastasios I. Die Entstehung des Byzantinischen Reiches*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 2009.

15 Andrew Louth, "Severos of Antioch: An Orthodox View", *Sobornost* 28.2 (2006), 6–18, here: 8.

16 For a good introduction to Severus and his work see Allen and Hayward, *Severus of Antioch*. Due to the fact that the Greek Christian tradition considered him a heretic, the *post mortem* influence of his oeuvre became limited to Near Eastern Christendom and his works have survived almost exclusively in (Syriac but also Coptic and Arabic) translations since the eighth century; for Severus' Greek legacy see van Rompay, "Severus, Patriarch of Antioch (512–538)", 4–6.

17 For Severus' theology and especially his Christology see Roberta C. Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies. Severus of Antioch, Philoxenus of Mabbug, and Jacob of Sarug*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1976, 9–56, Iain R. Torrance, *Christology after Chalcedon. Severus of Antioch and Sergius the Monophysite*, Norwich: Canterbury Press 1988, and Alois Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche II/2. Die Kirche von Konstantinopel im 6. Jahrhundert*, Freiburg: Herder 1989, 20–185.

18 For the latter an excellent English translation and commentary can be found in Torrance, *Christology after Chalcedon. Severus of Antioch and Sergius the Monophysite*.



His polemical and dogmatic texts but also his homilies were soon translated into Syriac – some already in his lifetime.<sup>19</sup> From the time of his episcopate 125 homilies have survived which Severus had delivered as patriarch.<sup>20</sup> The surviving letters range from around 508 to shortly before Severus' death in 538 over three decades and form especially for the historian an extremely important source. Severus is said to have written more than 3800 letters of which less than 300 have survived.<sup>21</sup>

However, none of these writings would have survived if Roman laws had been implemented to the letter. When Justin I became emperor in 518, Severus was forced into exile to Egypt; his stay there was only interrupted for a short visit to Constantinople in 535/6 where he unsuccessfully attempted to influence the religious policy in order to re-introduce non-Chalcedonianism as imperial doctrine.<sup>22</sup> Severus returned to Egypt where he died February 8, 538.

Even in exile and away from his patriarchal library, Severus remained a highly productive author, and officially he was not condemned as heretic although the Chalcedonians certainly regarded him as one. This changed in 536, when an ecumenical council in Constantinople condemned him and several of his followers as heretics. Emperor Justinian accepted the ecclesiastical decision and issued the appropriate edict (*Novella* 42) that requested Severus' works to be burned.

### c) Book Burning in the Roman World

Justinian's *Novella* that ordered Severus' writings to be burned was no novelty but expected by contemporaries as a short introduction to the tradition of book burning in the Roman world will show. The earliest documented case in the Roman world took place in the time of the Roman Republic in 181 BCE.<sup>23</sup> The first emperor Augustus (27 BCE – 14 CE) is said to have burned as many as 2000 texts of

19 For example Severus' treatises against Julian were already translated into Syriac by bishop Paul of Callinicum in 528; see J. S. Assemani, *Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae Codicum Manuscriptorum Catalogus in Tres Partes Distributus*, Vol. I.3, Rome: Typographia Linguarum Orientalium 1759, 232; for Paul's and later translations of Severus' homilies see Allen/Hayward, *Severus of Antioch*, 49f.

20 For an analysis of the homilies see especially Robin Darling, "The Patriarchate of Severus of Antioch, 512–518", unpubl. PhD-thesis University of Chicago 1982.

21 Calculations of Severus' letters slightly vary in the literature.

22 Menze, *Justinian and The Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church*, 186–91.

23 Daniel Sarefield, "The Symbolics of Book Burning: The Establishment of a Christian Ritual of Persecution", in: William E. Klingshirm and Linda Safran, *The Early Christian Book*, Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press 2007, 159–173, here: 161; for a broader study see also his unpublished dissertation: Daniel Sarefield, "Burning Knowledge". Studies of Bookburning in Ancient Rome", unpubl. PhD-thesis Ohio State University 2004. A general overview of the destruction of books in the ancient world can be found in Wolfgang Speyer, *Büchervernichtung und Zensur des Geistes bei Heiden, Juden und Christen*, Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann 1981 and shorter but updated in idem, "Büchervernichtung", *RAC* I Supplement (2003), 171–233; Dirk Rohmann, "Book Burning as Conflict Management in the Roman Empire (213 BCE – 200 CE)", *Ancient Society* 43 (2013), 115–149 undertakes a critical survey of the early testimonies in the Roman world.



magical and divinatory writings publicly; the amount of texts destroyed was rather unusual but the ritual of purification through fire itself continued in imperial Rome for the next three centuries.<sup>24</sup> Although Christians themselves had suffered from burnings of their holy texts under non-Christian emperors in the third and especially at the beginning of the fourth century,<sup>25</sup> already the first Christian emperor, Constantine I (306–337), found no fault with using this measure against writings that he found impious. Against the texts of Arius, a priest from Alexandria and later known as the arch-heresiarch of Late Antiquity, the first Christian book burning was set into motion.<sup>26</sup> Indeed the Christian practice of burning writings can be traced back to the New Testament and Paul's stay in Ephesus (Acts 19:19).

It became the standard practice in the later Roman empire that after a doctrine had been condemned as heresy by an ecumenical church council, the emperor was supposed to issue an edict that affirmed the condemnation and requested the heretical texts to be destroyed by fire. The Theodosian Code (*CTh*), compiled under Theodosius II (408–450), as well as the Justinianic Code (*CJ*), compiled under Justinian I (527–565), collect several laws against heretics whose books should have been confiscated and burned publicly under supervision of the authorities.<sup>27</sup> One of these laws issued against the *mathematici* in 408 CE (*CTh* 9.16.12) requested the bishop to act as supervisor of the book burning – not a secular judge.<sup>28</sup> If this was the emperor's initiative or the bishops' request is not

24 Short overview in Sarefield, "The Symbolics of Book Burning"; with a different approach to the question of purification see Rohmann, "Book Burning as Conflict Management".

25 The burning of the Scriptures during the last great persecutions is mentioned both by Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 12.2 (ed. and trans. Alfons Städele, FC 43, Turnhout: Brepols 2003, 120f) as well as Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 8.2 (ed. E. Schwartz and T. Mommsen, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition F. Winkelmann, GCS NF 6.2, Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1999, 740).

26 Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* I.9.30, ed. G. C. Hansen, GCS NF 1, Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1995, 33f; Sozomenos, *Historia Ecclesiastica* I.21.4; ed. and trans. G. C. Hansen, Vol. 1, Turnhout: Brepols 2004, 184–7; see also Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* III.66: the authorities searched for other heretical books as well; Eusebius von Caesarea, *De Vita Constantini*, ed. and trans. H. Schneider, FC 83, Turnhout: Brepols 2007, 408f; for book burning by Christians, Sarefield, "'Burning Knowledge'. Studies of Bookburning in Ancient Rome", 213–39 offers a comprehensive overview. Parts of it *verbatim* published as Daniel Sarefield, "Bookburning in the Christian Roman Empire: Transforming a Pagan Rite of Purification", in: *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perceptions and Practices*, ed. H. A. Drake, Aldershot: Ashgate 2006, 287–296.

27 For example *CTh* 16.5.34 from 398 CE against the Eunomians and Montanists, and *CJ* 1.1.3 from 448 CE against Porphyry as well as Nestorius, the former patriarch of Constantinople; see also *CJ* 1.5.6 already from 435 CE against Nestorius; *CJ* 1.5.8 (from 455 CE) banned all writings against the Council of Chalcedon, and requested texts by Eutyches and Apollinarius to be burned.

28 As it can be found for example in the law against the Eunomians and Montanists; see previous footnote. Ammianus Marcellinus reports book burning for 371/2 in connection with a plot of treason. Here, philosophical and magical writings were targeted, partially being burned in public under the supervision of judges, partially destroyed by their owners as precaution; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 29.1.41 and 29.2.4; ed. and trans. John C. Rolfe, LCL 331, Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press 1936, 210–13 and 216f.



known but probably since Athanasius of Alexandria (328–373), bishops had been keen on imposing their authority as orthodoxy on their flock.<sup>29</sup> In order to do so, it was necessary to take out of circulation intellectual resources that taught doctrines deviating from that of the bishop. Bishop Rabbula of Edessa (411/12–435/6) issued a canon requesting his clergy and the sons and daughters of the covenant to search for heretical books, and either bring them to their bishop or burn them immediately.<sup>30</sup> At the end of the fifth century book burning under the supervision of a bishop is attested in Berytus where the local bishop commissioned the public prosecutor and Christian students – among them the future patriarch Severus – to find and burn magical books in front of the church of the Virgin Mary.<sup>31</sup>

Burning books was therefore not only, and not foremost, a way of destroying magical or heretical texts (and eliminating the possibility that people could read them and be influenced<sup>32</sup>) but, being in the hands of religious authorities, also a ritual of purification from the pollution of unclean texts and thoughts.<sup>33</sup> Even 1500 years later Joseph Goebbels claimed in his speech at the Opernplatz in Berlin that the burning of indexed books would purify the German spirit from the pollution of Jewish intellectualism. Societies and circumstances can hardly be compared but that books have power and influence on people's mind, and that a public celebra-

29 See David Brakke, "Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria's Third-Ninth 'Festal Letter'", *Harvard Theological Review* 87.4 (1994), 395–419.

30 Rabbula of Edessa, *can.* 50, in: Arthur Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents regarding Legislation relative to Syrian Asceticism*, Stockholm ETSE 1960, 48. Other examples of bishops searching for heretical books have been identified; see Sarefield, "'Burning Knowledge'. Studies of Bookburning in Ancient Rome", 227; idem, "Bookburning in the Christian Roman Empire: Transforming a Pagan Rite of Purification", 291.

31 Zachariah Rhetor, *The Life of Severus by Zachariah of Mytilene*, ed. and trans. Lena Ambjörn, TeCLA 9, Piscataway: Gorgias Press 2008, 70f; *Two Early Lives of Severos, Patriarch of Antioch*, trans. S. Brock and B. Fitzgerald, Translated Texts for Historians 59, Liverpool 2013, 70f. Zachariah records a previous, private burning of magical books by the owner of those books as requested by the Christian students (Brock/Fitzgerald, 66f; Ambjörn, 62f).

For book burning in the west see the incident in Tarragona in the first quarter of the fifth century as recorded in Consentius' letters to Augustine: Raymond van Dam, "'Sheep in Wolves Clothing': the Letters of Consentius to Augustine", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 37.4 (1986), 515–35. Also the *Liber Pontificalis* reports the burning of Manichaean books in front of churches in Rome under popes Gelasius (492–6), Symmachus (498–514) and Hormisdas (514–23); see *The Books of Pontiffs* (*Liber Pontificalis*). *The Ancient Biographies of the First Ninety Roman Bishops to AD 715*, trans. R. Davis, Translated Texts for Historians 5, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1989, 42, 44f and 48.

32 Book burning as preventive action so that no one would be able to read the text is explicitly stated in *CJ* 1.1.3.

33 Judith Herrin, "Book Burning as Purification", in: Philip Rousseau and Manolis Papoutsakis, *Transformations of Late Antiquity. Essays for Peter Brown*, Farnham: Ashgate 2009, 205–222; Sarefield, "The Symbolics of Book Burning: The Establishment of a Christian Ritual of Persecution", 164. For the increasing importance of bishops in exposing "heresies" and "magic" – discussed with material of the Manichean and Priscillian controversies in the western part of the empire – see Raymond van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1985, 85–114.



tion of destruction and purification by flames are appropriate means to deal with the danger, seems a common denominator throughout history – in the twentieth century probably most famously put into fiction by Ray Bradbury in his *Fahrenheit 451*.<sup>34</sup>

In Christian Late Antiquity, heretical books were obviously regarded as endangering the well-being of orthodox communities.<sup>35</sup> It would have been sufficient and much more economical to erase the heretical text from the parchment or papyrus and reuse the material for another book. As the frequent reuse of parchments and papyri show, this was common practice in accordance with the value of the material. In case of condemned texts, however, it seems that this was not an option but rather a public spectacle of burning them was deemed appropriate for the spiritual cleanliness of society. As an *autodafé* of texts was hardly an efficient or even sufficient way to suppress heretical texts, it was foremost a symbolic ritual of purification by fire.<sup>36</sup>

d) The Manuscript Harvard syr. 22

Severus' letter on the *autodafé* of his own book can be found in Harvard syr. 22, a manuscript that has been (re)discovered and first described by Sebastian Brock in the 1970s.<sup>37</sup> It consists of 80 folios which Brock describes as "very badly damaged" "the vast majority of which are loose", and "the order of the folios is in complete disarray".<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, the manuscript is of some importance: it is of a fairly early date, eighth or ninth century, and it contains several texts not preserved anywhere else. One of them for example offers the invaluable discussion of faith between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian bishops in Constantinople in 532/3 which Sebastian Brock already published more than thirty years ago.<sup>39</sup> Some items of these texts are preserved in other manuscripts of well-researched collections (like the British Museum, now British Library) and have been published.<sup>40</sup> Other texts still await publication; one of them is the short letter to Nonnus Scholasticus (folio 60r–60v).

34 The novel is set in the future in which firemen are called upon to burn books for the common good of society. First published in 1953, it was reprinted many times – ironically in the 1970s in a "modified" version not authorized by Bradbury.

35 Speyer, *Büchervernichtung und Zensur des Geistes bei Heiden, Juden und Christen*, 35f.

36 Herrin, "Book Burning as Purification", especially 221f.

37 Sebastian Brock, "Some New Letters of the Patriarch Severus", *Studia Patristica* 12 (1975), 17–24. For the Harvard collection of Syriac manuscripts see also the short catalogue by Moshe H. Goshen-Gottstein, *Syriac Manuscripts in the Harvard College Library*, Missoula: Scholars Press 1979, here 45f.

38 Brock, "Some New Letters of the Patriarch Severus", 18.

39 Sebastian Brock, "The Conversations with the Syrian Orthodox under Justinian (532)", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 47 (1981), 87–121; for a full list of texts preserved in Ms. syr 22 see Brock, "Some New Letters of the Patriarch Severus", 18–22; see also a new text with translation by Sebastian Brock, "A Report from a Supporter of Severos on Trouble in Alexandria", forthcoming.

40 However, see also the debate between Sergius and Severus: Torrance, *Christology after Chalcedon. Severus of Antioch and Sergius the Monophysite*, especially 19f.



e) The Content of the Letter to Nonnus Scholasticus and Severus' Book

The heading of the text (probably provided later for this letter collection) summarizes the text: "Letter of the holy Severus to Nonnus Scholasticus from the city of Harran, concerning Nonnus' report to the persecuted bishops in Alexandria about the sign and wonder God performed through Severus' book. The heretics threw it into fire (but) it did not burn". Nonnus Scholasticus is otherwise unknown; the epithet *scholasticus* may identify him as a lawyer (although other options are possible).<sup>41</sup> If he was a former acquaintance of Severus from his days when the later patriarch studied law in Berytus remains speculative. He certainly was a non-Chalcedonian, and may also have been a benefactor of the monastery that is mentioned in Severus' letter, or otherwise closely linked to it. The heading indicates that Nonnus – in a letter that preceded Severus' letter – reported to the non-Chalcedonian bishops in Alexandria about the attempted burning of one of Severus' books. Severus re-narrates the story in his reply:

You have related to the pious bishops a wonder that had happened through our book, in which were found expressions from the Holy Scriptures and from the holy fathers, which they were teaching occasionally at the churches. For you have written that when a chaste and not deceitful person, wearing the habit of monks, from one of the monasteries, was reciting from this book to certain people who themselves have consented to enter the monastic life, those who struggle with God and who are found guilty with a curse from heaven, i. e., Cyriacus and those with him, came to that place. They seized it from his hands, and they kindled a fire from a lot of dry-rubbish. And they threw it (in) to burn. When the fire was hindered and checked with the force of the Spirit which was in those words which were spoken by Him in the Old and The New Testaments, and (with the force) of those (words) of the God-inspired teachers who have interpreted this. It [i. e. the fire] did not reach the inflammable part of the material, but with no burning that book remained (intact) due to those scripts, and in the leather with which it was enshrouded and wrapped on the outside. And I do not suppose that this sign was for a demonstration of the faith of orthodoxy. God forbid! But for a refutation which directs the thoughts of those wicked ones, acted by God, who is capable of doing anything. Because the signs are (performed) on account of the unbelievers, and not on the account of the believers.

The description of the book indicates that it was a (doctrinal) *florilegium*, which by default was full of references to the Scriptures and the Church Fathers.<sup>42</sup> "Our book" could either point to a book, which contained writings by Severus, or

41 *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire (PLRE)* 2, 788: Nonnus 3 mentions only this text. There is another "Nonnus Scholasticus" in the sixth century but from Antioch in Egypt and unlikely to be identical with Nonnus from Harran: *PLRE* 3, 949: Nonnus 4. For "scholasticus" see the discussion about possible meanings in Axel Claus, "Ο ΣΧΟΛΑΣΤΙΚΟΣ", unpubl. PhD University of Cologne 1965.

42 Henry Chadwick, "Florilegium", in: *RAC* 7 (1969), 1131–60, dogmatic *florilegia* 1156–9; Bernhard Neuschäfer, "Florilegium", in *Lexikon der Antiken Christlichen Literatur*, ed. S. Döpp and W. Geerlings, Freiburg: Herder 3rd edition 2002, 270f; see also the collection of *florilegia* and references to scholarly literature in A. Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche. Vol. 2/1: Das Konzil von Chalcedon – Rezeption und Widerspruch (451–518)*, Freiburg: Herder 1991, 58–88.



a book, which Severus once owned – or both. As Severus wrote a number of doctrinal treatises, it would be futile to find out which one it could have been.<sup>43</sup>

If the book was indeed owned by Severus, he may have sent it at some point of his tenure as patriarch to the abbot of this monastery, maybe at the abbot's request. Alternatively, the book changed hands when Severus left Antioch for exile as the patriarch could not take his library with him. He may have tried to save the non-Chalcedonian doctrinal works from destruction by his Chalcedonian successor by entrusting them to confidants who relocated them to non-Chalcedonian monasteries in Syria and Mesopotamia.

#### f) The Monastery and its Chalcedonian Intruders

To locate the monastery exactly or name it with some certainty remains impossible. The fact that Nonnus is reported as being from the city of Harran makes it likely that the described miracle happened in a non-Chalcedonian monastery in or around that city. One option would be the Qobe monastery that also had connections to Edessa and was probably situated on the road between Harran and Edessa.<sup>44</sup> Considering that a small cohort of Chalcedonians entered the monastery, and taking into account that they found only one "heretical" book among its book collection, it may have been a rather small monastery with a rather insignificant book collection.<sup>45</sup>

Cyriacus, the head of the Chalcedonian party intruding the monastery, was accompanied by a small party of five or six subordinates – probably soldiers – at his command. Although a civil or military magnate could have undertaken the task of confiscating books, it seems more likely that a Chalcedonian detachment entering a non-Chalcedonian monastery would be headed by a clergyman.<sup>46</sup> And although

43 See the list of Severus' *florilegia*/dogmatic treatises containing patristic quotations in Grillmeier, *Jesur der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*. Vol. 2/1, 75f.

44 Marlia Mundell Mango, "Where was Beth Zagba?" in: *Harvard Ukrainian Studies Vol. 7. Okeanos: Essays presented to Ihor Ševčenko on his Sixtieth Birthday by his Colleagues and Students* (1983), 405–430, here: 413–15. If it was indeed the Qobe monastery, the monks – having been expelled in the 520ies – had resettled by 536.

45 The main collection of any monastery, however, were probably biblical books anyway, certainly a psalter and some gospels; other non-Chalcedonian monasteries may have contained more (non-Chalcedonian) books; see for example *Akten der Ephesinischen Synode vom Jahre 449*, ed. and trans. J. Flemming, AKGW.PH 15.1, Berlin 1917, 158f which mentions a 'treasury of books'; see also Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church*, 135–40.

46 See for example the story by John of Ephesus, in which he accused the Chalcedonians of using the army against monks: *Incerti Auctoris Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum Vulgo Dictum*, ed. I.-B. Chabot, CSCO 104. Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae 1933, 39f (*The Chronicle of Zuqnin Pars III and IV A. D. 488–775*, trans. A. Harrak. Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies: Toronto 1999, 65). The Roman troops were headed by a *chorepiscopus* and a *periodeutes*. For a short but instructive overview of how the Chalcedonian persecutions were put into place see Jan van Ginkel, "Persuasion and Persecution: Establishing a Church Unity in the Sixth Century", in: *All those Nations... Cultural Encounters within and with the Near East. Studies presented to Han Drijvers*, ed. H. L. J. Vanstiphout, Groningen: Styx 1999, 61–9.



this intruding party was small, it was probably headed by a clergy with authority over an abbot, like a *chorepiscopus* or a bishop. As Severus did not further identify Cyriacus, he seemed to have been a well-known opponent of the non-Chalcedonians. A Cyriacus can be found in one of Severus' letters dated to 522–5.<sup>47</sup> The Cyriacus in this letter is described as “miserable” and “wicked” which corresponds to Cyriacus of the letter to Nonnus, although, admittedly, seen through the eyes of a non-Chalcedonian, that description may fit any Chalcedonian! The Cyriacus of 522–5 seems to have been a cleric as Severus recounts a subdeacon who separated from Cyriacus, thereby indicating that Cyriacus was a priest or maybe even bishop. It may well have been a priest who became a Chalcedonian bishop between 525 and 536. The two attested Chalcedonian bishops named Cyriacus at the time of the letter (536/7)<sup>48</sup> in the patriarchate of Antioch are bishops of Seleucobelus in Syria II and Sophanene in Mesopotamia but it could, of course, also have been a local chorepiscopus or the bishop of Harran whose name is otherwise unattested.<sup>49</sup>

g) Ephrem of Amida's “Descent” to the East

The letter was clearly written after Severus had been expelled from his see in Antioch in 518 as it is introduced as an answer to “Nonnus' report to the persecuted bishops in Alexandria”. Several non-Chalcedonian bishops had fled to Alexandria at some point after the accession of Justin I to the throne. In 535 the non-Chalcedonian bishops Constantine of Laodicea, Antoninus of Aleppo, Thomas of Damascus (or Thomas of Yabrud), Pelagius of Kalenderis, and Eustathius of Pherre certainly stayed in Alexandria, and it seems likely that Nonnus had sent his letter to these bishops.<sup>50</sup>

For bishops burning books see Sarefield, “The Symbolics of Book Burning: The Establishment of a Christian Ritual of Persecution”, 171.

47 Severus, *Select Letters* V.15, in: *The Select Letters of Severus Patriarch of Antioch*, Vol. 2, ed. and trans. E. W. Brooks, 394–405 (350–9), here: 394f (351). Brooks dated the letter to 522–7, Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church*, 114, 146 argues that the cluster of bishops stayed around Marde probably only until 525.

48 For the date see below.

49 Attested Cyriaci: Giorgio Fedalto, *Hierarchia Ecclesiastica Orientalis, Vol. 2 Patriarchatus Alexandrinus, Antiochenus, Hierosolymitanus*, Padova: Edizioni Messaggero 1988, 781 and 858. Harran: Fedalto, *Hierarchia Ecclesiastica Orientalis*, 811. There were several Cyriaci present in Constantinople in 536 but none of them was bishop: *ACO* III, ed. Schwartz, 249 (priests and archimandrites).

50 In 535 these bishops wrote *Canons* and sent them from Alexandria to their non-Chalcedonian communities in the eastern provinces. This text also refers to the time of persecution in which these bishops had fled to Alexandria. It can be dated to 535; for the text see *The Synodicon in the West Syrian Tradition*, ed. and trans. A. Vööbus, CSCO Vols. 376/8, Louvain 1975, 159–163 [154–157]. For the date: Arthur Vööbus, *Syrische Kanonensammlungen. Ein Beitrag zur Quellenkunde*, Vol. 1, B, CSCO 317, Leuven: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO 1970, 269–273. See also Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church*, 156.



Severus may have been one of the bishops hiding in Alexandria, but more likely, the bishops in Alexandria forwarded Nonnus' report through a trustworthy messenger – who knew the exact whereabouts of his patriarch in Egypt – to Severus. Severus most likely wrote this letter 536/37 because the council of Constantinople convened in 536 condemned the non-Chalcedonians, namely Severus, Anthimus (patriarch of Constantinople 535/6), Peter of Apamea (former metropolitan until he went into exile in 519), Zoaras (a non-Chalcedonian stylite) and their followers. Emperor Justinian issued his *Novella* 42 which confirmed the decisions of the council and decreed that no one was allowed to possess or copy any of Severus' writings or books. Furthermore, the emperor required that those books were to be burned.

In other words, *Novella* 42 provided the Chalcedonian church with a much sought-after basis to enforce Chalcedon in the whole empire.<sup>51</sup> Nothing could have made Ephrem, the Chalcedonian patriarch of Antioch who was responsible for implementing the decree in his jurisdiction, happier than this. According to the non-Chalcedonian bishop and historian John of Ephesus, in the wake of the council, the patriarch undertook his infamous "descent to the East".<sup>52</sup> John vividly describes how Ephrem "persecuted, disturbed and troubled the entire East and the Church of God and all Syria."<sup>53</sup> Ephrem supposedly expelled monks from monasteries, made stylites to come down from the pillars, drove out hermits and forced people by the sword to take the Chalcedonian Eucharist everywhere in the East.<sup>54</sup> Ps-Zachariah Rhetor to a certain extent differentiates between Ephrem who was supposed to "admonish" people to adhere to Chalcedon and Clementinus – about whom nothing is known but from the context can be assumed that he was an army officer, probably a *dux* – who was to "coerce the inhabitants of the cities in the East to accept the Council [of Chalcedon]".<sup>55</sup>

The patriarch's route towards the East up to the Persian border can be reconstructed according to the accounts of two non-Chalcedonian authors, Ps-

51 Emperor Justinian had given up – at least for a while – his attempts for reconciliation with the non-Chalcedonians. Although it seems that the enforcement was limited to the strongholds of the non-Chalcedonians in Syria and Mesopotamia; Egypt was another case.

52 For Ephrem see Joseph Lebon, "Éphrem d'Amid, Patriarche d'Antioche (526–544)", *Recueil de Travaux* 40 (1914), 197–214 and Glanville Downey, "Ephraemius, Patriarch of Antioch", *Church History* 8 (1938), 364–370.

53 *Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum*, ed. Chabot, 38 (*The Chronicle of Zuqnin*, trans. Harrak, 64).

54 The Chalcedonian tradition of course remembered Ephrem as the successful but peaceful converter of non-Chalcedonian stylites: John Moschus, *Pratum Spirituale* 38; *The Spiritual Meadow of John Moschus*, trans. John Wortley, Cistercian Studies 139, Kalamazoo/MI: Cistercian 1992, 25f. See below the discussion of the ordeal by fire.

55 Ps-Zachariah Rhetor *H.E.* X.1, *Historia Ecclesiastica Zachariae Rhetori vulgo adscripta*, Vol. 2, ed. and trans. E. W. Brooks, CSCO 84/88, Paris: 1919–24, 174f (*The Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor. Church and War in Late Antiquity*, ed. and trans. G. Greatrex, R. Phenix and C. B. Horn, Translated Texts for Historians 55, Liverpool 2011, 399); Clementinus: *PLRE* 3, "Clementinus 2", 318.



Zachariah Rhetor and Elias, the author of the *Vita* of John of Tella.<sup>56</sup> Ephrem visited Aleppo/Beroea, Qenneshrin/Chalcis, Mabbug/Hierapolis, Batnan, Edessa, Sura, Callinicum, "the rest of the border region", Resh'aina/Theodosiopolis, Amida, and Tella/Constantina.<sup>57</sup> One of Ephrem's army officers, Cometas, who was ordered to find one of the most dangerous opponents of the Chalcedonian church, John of Tella, first stopped at Harran, before he went to Nisibis and Singara (in Persia) to catch John.<sup>58</sup> John of Tella had threatened the Chalcedonian Church of the Empire for the last fifteen years by ordaining thousands of priests throughout the *Oriens*, and thereby creating a new underground-church that shook the foundation of the official church of the empire.<sup>59</sup> From Nisibis, John of Tella was brought to Dara, and from there he was led to Theodosiopolis, where the bishops assembled to await Ephrem.<sup>60</sup> Further Chalcedonian protagonists mentioned to have already been there were Asylus, bishop of Theodosiopolis and Christophorus, chorepiscopus of Amida. Travelling with Ephrem's entourage were – in addition to a sizeable army – Rufinus, Ephrem's *scholasticus*, and probably Abraham Bar Kayli, the metropolitan of Amida. On the way to Antioch where John was jailed and died a year later, Cometas, who led the prisoner there, stopped again at Harran and frightened the non-Chalcedonians in and around the city.<sup>61</sup>

In short, following the council of 536, the Chalcedonians mobilized an enormous amount of manpower and combed through the eastern provinces up to the Persian border for "heretical" elements in order to implement the imperial decree. The patriarch's entourage comprised bishops and military but it seems that several Chalcedonian parties independently from each other travelled the patriarchate and paid non-Chalcedonian villages and monasteries a visit in order to enforce the new religious policy. Probably one of the smaller troops led by

56 Elias provides less place names for Ephrem's visits than Ps-Zachariah but gives more detailed information about his entourage.

57 Ps-Zachariah Rhetor *H.E.* X.1, Brooks, 175 (Greatrex, Phenix and Horn, 399).

58 Elias, *Life of John of Tella*, in: *Vitae virorum apud Monophysitas celeberrimorum*, ed. and trans. E. W. Brooks, CSCO 7–8, Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae 1907, 66f (English translation: *The Biography of John of Tella (d. A. D. 537) by Elias*, trans. J. R. Ghanem, Phd Thesis Madison/Wisc. 1970, 77). For John see Nathanael J. Andrade, "The Syriac Life of John of Tella and the Frontier *Politeia*", *Hugoye* 12.2 (2009), 199–234 and the next footnote.

59 In addition to a few other instructional texts, John also wrote a *Profession of Faith* in which he imagines a different church with an ecclesiology independent from the Roman empire and an imperial ideology; see especially Volker Menze and Kutlu Akah, *John of Tella's Profession of Faith: the Legacy of a Sixth-Century Syrian Orthodox Bishop*, Piscataway: Gorgias Press 2009. See also Volker Menze, "The *Regula ad Diaconos*: John of Tella, his Eucharistic Ecclesiology, and the Establishment of an Ecclesiastical Hierarchy in Exile", *OrChr* 90 (2006), 44–90. The *Novella* 42 forbade any person to trouble the peace of the Church, convert or baptize anyone, or give out the Eucharist outside the Chalcedonian churches. This was subject to punishment and Ephrem intended to exercise this against John.

60 Elias, *Life of John of Tella*, ed. Brooks, 74f (Ghanem, 86).

61 Elias, *Life of John of Tella*, ed. Brooks, 86f (Ghanem, 99f).



Cyriacus came to the monastery mentioned in Nonnus' report, and seized Severus' book.

The violent image of "Ephrem's descent" painted by the non-Chalcedonian authors cannot completely be reconciled with Severus' letter. No physical violence by the party of Cyriacus is mentioned, and the monks were not even expelled although there is no question about their adherence to a "heretical" doctrine. The Chalcedonians' only target in the monastery was the destruction of the non-Chalcedonian intellectual resources.

This should not be interpreted as a lack of thoroughness on the side of the Chalcedonians but as prudence as Christian authorities had learned over the last two centuries that there was nothing worse in enforcing the law than creating martyrs among those being under enforcement. Michael Gaddis in his *There is no Crime for those who have Christ* phrased this aptly: it was "easier to let the law being violated than to punish the wrongdoers and thus risk earning those Christians the title of martyrs – and themselves that of persecutors."<sup>62</sup> Independent from the ruling of a church council or a canon, in the eyes of Christians – being sensitive to persecutions – any group using physical coercive measures could not claim to be the true religion.

Interpreting Severus' letter, the Chalcedonians had learned their lesson well, and avoided painstakingly to create eye-witness material that could be used for a hagiographical narrative. However, by failing to burn one of Severus' books, they actually gave their opponents another welcome opportunity to prove themselves as being orthodox in the eyes of their contemporaries.

#### h) The Book that did not burn: Miracle or Incompetence?

Nonnus and all non-Chalcedonians who heard about the story of a book of their beloved patriarch thrown into the fire that did not burn, considered the fire as divine ordeal. Instead of purifying the society by destroying a supposedly heretical text as intended, the fire acted as a tool of God proving the orthodoxy of the non-Chalcedonians.<sup>63</sup>

In the post-Chalcedonian period such ordeals were well-established patterns – at least in hagiographical narratives. John Rufus reports in his *Plerophoriae* (a collection of non-Chalcedonian anecdotes, visions, and prophecies from probably shortly after 512) that a Chalcedonian village priest wished to prove the orthodoxy of the Council of Chalcedon against a stubborn non-Chalcedonian villager by proposing an ordeal by fire. Both should hold their right hands over a fire and the

62 Michael Gaddis, *There is no Crime for those who have Christ. Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2005, 191.

63 Severus claims in the letter that the miracle was not provided by God to prove the non-Chalcedonians' orthodoxy but as a sign for non-believers. However, even Severus' rhetorical volte regards the Chalcedonians as non-believers who could learn from the "miracle", and the non-Chalcedonians as orthodox who simply would not need further proof of their righteousness.



one whose hand was not burned, was believed to be in the possession of the true faith.<sup>64</sup> Another story recounts two groups of monks, one Chalcedonian, the other non-Chalcedonian who wished to prove their respective faith by throwing the *Tome* of Pope Leo (as proof-text for the Chalcedonians), and the *Encyclical* of the usurper Basiliscus (as proof-text for the non-Chalcedonians) respectively into the flames.<sup>65</sup> As predictable, in both cases the non-Chalcedonians held the upper hand – the priestly hand gets severely burned and the *Tome* of Leo was consumed by the fire while the *Encyclical* survived its ordeal. The same method of trial by fire is commemorated for Ephrem of Amida around 90 years later in John Moschus' *Spiritual Meadow* – only that here the Chalcedonian won the day over a non-Chalcedonian stylite.<sup>66</sup>

If such an ordeal by fire functioned as a *topos*, can it be assumed that also the miracle of Severus "non-flammable" book belongs to the same category? John Rufus' *Plerophoriae* and John Moschus' *Spiritual Meadow* are hagiographical texts, and the reader would be surprised – to say the least – if these ordeals had turned out any different than they did. However, nothing can be said about the historical evidence behind these stories.

The case is different with Severus' letter, even though the intention of proving the orthodoxy of Severus and his writings – and by extension the non-Chalcedonian cause in general – remains the same. Nonnus had probably not been an eyewitness, and he or the monks of the monastery could simply have created this story. However, this seems unlikely, not only because the genre is different and the account of a miracle was not a natural ingredient for a letter but also for scientific considerations.

From the letter, it is not possible to reconstruct how Severus' book may have looked like exactly. However, it is clear that it was a codex bound in leather, and the pages themselves most likely made of parchment.<sup>67</sup> Beyond that we can only

64 *Plerophoriae* 47; edition and French translation by F. Nau, *Plérophories*, in: *PO* 8 (1912), 1–208, here 98–100; Volker Menze, "Die Stimme von Maiuma. Johannes Rufus, das Konzil von Chalcedon und die wahre Kirche", in: *Literarische Konstituierung von Identifikationsfiguren in der Antike*, ed. B. Aland, J. Hahn and C. Ronning, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2003, 220f.

65 *Plerophoriae* 46; Nau, *Plérophories*, 98; eastern Chalcedonians may have been sceptical of Leo's *Tome* as well but in a non-Chalcedonian narrative, this text constituted obviously the Chalcedonian statement of faith. The *Encyclical* was a decree by the usurper Basiliscus, published in 475, that was directed against the *Tome* of Leo.

66 John Moschus, *Pratum Spirituale* 38; *The Spiritual Meadow of John Moschus*, Wortley, 25f.

67 For the invention of the codex see the classic, short introduction by C. H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex*, London: British Academy 1983; however, it does not deal with the binding of codices (see next footnote); a detailed study on early codices offers Eric G. Turner, *The Typology of the Early Codex*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1977.

Concerning the question if the pages were made of parchment or papyri, see for example the list of dated Syriac manuscripts in W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, Vol. 3, London: British Museum 1872, 1236: all Syriac manuscripts from the sixth century (more than 20) in the British Library are made of parchment; however, there are some Syriac



speculate about its shape as comparisons are non-existing.<sup>68</sup> Maybe in order to imagine the form and functioning of the codex a well-known comparison – although from Egypt, around 300 years earlier and the pages being made of papyri (as well as parts of the binding) – are the Nag Hammadi codices. They are also bound in leather, and many of them have leather ties and envelope flaps that would keep the books closed – which would fit the description of the letter that says that the leather cover protected the inner pages.<sup>69</sup>

There is nothing to prove that Severus' codex had a similar closing mechanism but it may be a possibility. If so, the prosecutors should have unlocked and opened the codex (or even rip off the covers as the Nazis did in 1933) to allow oxygen to reach the inner parts of the codex as otherwise the leather-bound covers would have protected the inside quite well.<sup>70</sup> If thrown in flames, leather shrinks from the heat but is not easily inflammable. In general, it is impossible to state the ignition temperature of "leather" as this depends on the kind of animal it was made from, the tanning process, its humidity, thickness, density, shape of object it was used for, as well as the external conditions (air flow, exposure to oxygen, how the

manuscript made of papyri preserved in Egypt, and they must have circled outside Egypt as well (although not preserved).

- 68 The standard reference work for bookbinding is J. A. Szirmai, *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2000 which provides a good introduction to the earliest Coptic as well as Byzantine codices but does not contain any discussion of Syriac codices. Similarly disappointing in this respect are also modern catalogues on early (Christian) manuscripts: dates, discovery, script etc. are considered but no word about the binding. *The History of Bookbinding 525–1950 A. D.*, ed. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore/Maryland: Trustees of the Walters Art Gallery 1957 has despite its title hardly any – and no relevant – examples from the sixth century; also Berthe van Regemorter, *Some Oriental Bindings in the Chester Beatty Library*, Dublin: Hodges Figgis 1961, 11 with plate 3b offers only one Syriac example from the eighth/ninth century.

W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, 3. Vols., London: British Museum 1870–72 remains a master piece with meticulous description of date, script etc. for each manuscript, and contains even an index of dated Syriac manuscripts. However, nothing is said about their bindings, if original or rebound etc. Lucas van Rompay told me in an e-mail that the old bindings – if existing – of Syriac manuscripts from Deir al-Surian which had been brought to London in 1830s and 1840s, were most probably replaced by new bindings. In other words, Syriac codices from the sixth century do exist but they no longer have their original sixth century binding. Therefore, to the best of my knowledge, no Syriac manuscript from the sixth century can be brought into the discussion here as reference.

- 69 Szirmai, *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, 7–31 for Nag Hammadi and other late antique Coptic Codices.

- 70 Claus Maywald from the Gutenberg-Museum in Mainz pointed out to me in an e-mail communication that after fires in libraries, often books can be found with burned covers but which are intact inside.

The disastrous fire in the Anna Amalia library in Weimar/Germany in 2004 which destroyed 50.000 books showed that more research is necessary in order to understand how exactly external factors like fire, heat, water etc. affect books and the material they are made of respectively (leather, parchment, paper etc.). Studies are undertaken at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts at Hildesheim to understand these factors alone, as well as in combination (first fire that damages the book, then the water used to extinguish the fire), and also considering the locations of the books in the building.



leather is placed in the fire etc).<sup>71</sup> In fact, to define the ignition temperature of solid materials in general is difficult, and Ray Bradbury was mistaken when he assumed that the (auto)ignition temperature of printed paper is 451° Fahrenheit (ca. 232° Celsius).<sup>72</sup> However, even below the ignition temperature, solid material can change and become disintegrated – paper, for example, already yellows, and parchments curls and browns at around 150° Celsius.<sup>73</sup> If the pages of Severus' book were made of parchment, they would have shrunk considerably because of the heat.

However, all questions concerning the ignition temperature of the codex aside, it is very likely that the ignition temperature of the “dry-rubbish” – which probably can be interpreted as dry branches, dung and maybe some hay found in or around the monastery – as reported by Nonnus used to make the bonfire was lower than that of the leather codex.<sup>74</sup> In other words, the fire lit of “dry-rubbish” would burn (at an unknown temperature as this cannot be estimated and differs between the inner part of the fire and the tips of the flames by several hundred degrees Celsius) but if the Chalcedonians did not provide for enough burning material or waited long enough, the heat transfer from the fire would only let the codex shrink and char but not burn it. If burning indeed started, the pages would burn from the outside slowly towards the inside.<sup>75</sup>

One example of a Syriac manuscript (10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century) made of parchment that was damaged by fire but did not burn completely, can be found in the library of

71 See for example the dated but very instructive study by S. H. Graf, *Ignition Temperature of Various Papers, Woods, and Fabrics*, Bulletin 26, Engineering Experiment Station: Corvallis, Oregon 1949, especially the conclusions pp. 64–66. For different kind of leathers and its tanning processes see R. Reed, *Ancient Skins, Parchments and Leathers*, London and New York: Seminar Press 1972, 13–85.

72 Gisbert Rodewald, *Brandlehre*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 6th edition 2007, 179; in the literature on fire/fire protection usually a range of temperatures can be found at which paper and other solid material ignite. The temperatures stated here are taken over from the literature and offer idealized estimates.

The ignition temperature should also not be mixed up with the minimal burning temperature – the temperature that is needed to continue the burning process without further external energy supply, and which is considerably higher than the ignition temperature; Rodewald, *Brandlehre*, 185. He presents data for ignition temperature as well as the minimal burning temperature. For example, for paper the difference would be more than twice as high, c. 360° (ignition) versus c. 800° Celsius (burning).

73 Tony Cafe, “Physical Constants for Investigators”, <http://www.tforensic.com.au/docs/article10.html>; Reed, *Ancient Skins, Parchments and Leathers*, 317.

74 See Cafe, “Physical Constants for Investigators”, <http://www.tforensic.com.au/docs/article10.html> indicates for example decayed woods as igniting at 150° Celsius, hay at 172° Celsius whereas leather – it should be assumed under same conditions – would need 212° Celsius.

75 For the temperatures by which leather and parchment start to shrink and char (250–300° Celsius): Reed, *Ancient Skins, Parchments and Leathers*, 316–19. For a half-burned Syrian manuscript see Sachau 14; Eduard Sachau, *Verzeichnis der syrischen Handschriften der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin*, Berlin: A. Asher & Co. 1899, 27: an East Syrian manuscript from maybe 13<sup>th</sup> century, that was rebound 1386, had its upper part of the pages destroyed by fire.



Duke University/Durham; no covers are left, folios at the beginning and end are missing, but from the remaining 87 folios, only the first four at the beginning and the last 14 are heavily damaged, while all the inner folios are more or less complete.<sup>76</sup> In other words, it seems to have been exposed to a serious burning but nevertheless substantial parts have survived almost undamaged.

Severus' book may have been exposed to a fire that did so little damage to the codex that partisan interpreters could categorize it as a "miracle". Whether the leather-bound covers shrank, and parts of the parchments got charred or maybe even parts of the pages became unreadable, is not recorded but was most certainly the case. In the eyes of the non-Chalcedonians that did not diminish the miracle. With the knowledge of modern fire investigation techniques, however, it can be deduced that ignorance and inexperience on the side of the Chalcedonians caused the failure. The prosecutors did not rip off the covers or cut the codex into pieces to facilitate the burning process, and they only lit a small fire with available material on the spot.

### Conclusion

It remains unknown what happened to Severus' book but it seems unlikely that the Chalcedonian prosecutors left it untouched after they had failed to burn it. They may have taken it with them and got rid of it at a later stage. Either way, however, this did not matter for the non-Chalcedonians. God had provided them with a miracle – in public and in the presence of their enemies. Scientific explanations were not available to sixth-century monks but they could have studied the Old Testament. When king Jehoiakim of Judah first cut apart (he apparently knew what he was doing!) and then burned the scroll of the prophet Jeremiah containing the divine words of punishment for Judah, God requested to have the scroll rewritten, adding concerning the king of Judah: "You have dared to burn this scroll [...] He [the king] shall have no one to sit upon the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night. And I will punish him and his offspring and his servants for his iniquity; I will bring on them [...] all the disasters with which I have threatened them" (Jer 36:29–31). If Severus had lived a few years longer, he most certainly would have interpreted the bubonic plague that broke out in the Eastern Roman Empire in 541/2 in this Old Testament framework, and regarded the pandemic as a divine disaster caused by a heretical religious policy that had persecuted him and ordered his texts to be burned.

Be this as it may, the – purely local – purification ceremony of burning Severus' "heretical" book turned out to be a public relations disaster for the Chalcedo-

76 Maria Doerfler, Emanuel Fiano, Lucas van Rompay, *Syriac Books & Manuscripts of the Duke University Collection. A Special Exhibit*, [Durham 2011] with plates; accessible online: <https://archive.org/stream/lumodosuryoyo20114950doer#page/n0/mode/2up>.



nians. By failing to complete their *autodafé*, the Chalcedonians provided their opponents with a triumph interpreted as divine miracle. Daniel Sarefield concluded his dissertation on book burning in the Roman World claiming that "bookburning does not appear to have been a particularly effective method of eradicating prohibited works."<sup>77</sup> It appears indeed to be a myth that books easily burn and an *autodafé* would be a simple and effective way to destroy texts that were considered illicit.<sup>78</sup>

However, although the party of Cyriacus can be blamed for this singular instance, an overall purification of the Chalcedonian church from heretical books also failed. Severus' books, not just this one reported by Nonnus, certainly did not burn in Erich Kästner's metaphorical understanding. Despite the order to burn them, Severus' works still circulated even in Greek in the later sixth century, many of them have survived in Syriac until today, including this very letter providing a unique glimpse of how an imperial edict for burning heretical codices was implemented in the Later Roman Empire.<sup>79</sup>

77 Sarefield, "'Burning Knowledge'. Studies of Bookburning in Ancient Rome", 237.

78 *Contra*, for example, Rohmann, "Book Burning as Conflict Management in the Roman Empire", 119. However, I have to admit that I undertook an *autodafé* at the Central European University in September 2013 to see for myself how a leather-bound book would burn, and it burned down much faster than I anticipated. I have to thank CEU for allowing me to do this on its premises, and the communication office to film it and provide me with a short movie; see <https://www.dropbox.com/s/xitsjfi51vyr9wl/Volker%20Menze.mp4?dl=0>.

Water may damage leather more substantially in the long run than a half-hearted attempt to burn it: worms and dampness are named in canon 68 of the Council in Trullo (692) as causes for the destruction of books, not fire (*The Council of Trullo Revisited*, ed. G. Nedungatt and M. Featherstone, Rome: Pontificio Instituto Orientale 1995, 150f); see also John Chrysostom, *Homily XXXVIII on Acts* in which John reports that he picked up a book from the river that a magician had tried to deposit there before soldiers could catch him with the incriminating text (*Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans*, NPNF 11, trans. J. Walker, J. Sheppard, and H. Browne, rev. G. Stevens, reprinted Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1997, 444).

79 For Severus in Greek see van Rompay, "Severus, Patriarch of Antioch (512–538)", 6. However, not just a good number of non-Chalcedonian texts, for example by Severus, have survived but also other forbidden "heretical" texts like Nestorius' apology, the *Bazaar of Heracleides*, in Syriac translation.



60<sup>r</sup> col a, line 33 |  
 60<sup>r</sup> col b |  
 60<sup>v</sup> col a |

80



[f. 60r<sup>o</sup>, column a, line 33 | Letter of the holy Severus to Nonnus Scholasticus from the city of Harran, concerning Nonnus' report to the persecuted bishops in Alexandria about the sign and wonder God performed through Severus' book. The heretics threw it into fire (but) it did not burn. §

To Nonnus Scholasticus, trained in everything, lover of Christ, Severus.

The writings of your wisdom, the lover of Christ, to our feebleness have arrived, in which you have related to the pious bishops a wonder [60r<sup>o</sup>, col b] that had happened through our book, in which were found expressions from the Holy Scriptures and from the holy fathers, which they were accurately teaching from time to time at the churches. For you have written that when a chaste and not deceitful person, wearing the habit of monks, from one of the monasteries, was reciting from this book to certain people who themselves have consented to enter the monastic life, those who struggle with God and who are found guilty with a curse from heaven, i. e., Cyriacus and those with him, came to that place. They seized it from his hands, and they kindled a fire from a lot of dry-rubbish. And they threw it (in) to burn. When the fire was hindered and checked with the force of the Spirit which was in those words which were spoken by Him in the Old and The New Testaments, and (with the force) of those (words) of the God-inspired teachers who have interpreted this. It [i.e. the fire] did not reach the inflammable part of the material, but with no burning that book remained (intact) in those written parts, and in the leather with which it was enshrouded and wrapped on the outside. And I do not suppose that this sign was for a demonstration of the faith of orthodoxy. God forbid! But for a refutation which directs the thoughts of those wicked ones, acted by God, who is capable of doing anything. Because the signs are (performed) on account of the unbelievers, and not on account of the believers. These things which Paul repeated and instructed in the letters which he wrote to the Corinthians, to whom it was permitted to talk in the different languages of the peoples. For he said thus: "Tongues, then, are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers."<sup>81</sup> For when ... to them ... spoken, ... [60v<sup>o</sup>, col a] (they) were hardened and willingly were blinded, and He who rules everything through wisdom was stirred who did such things. So much so that when the Gospel spread to the ends of the world and, as if to say, it gazed intently at all the nations in the preaching of the true religion, it held its peace as if in a large part from effecting such things. And these things are effected, not as in a demonstration, but on account of the necessity of those barbarians who, not being able to hear and perceive the subtlety of the teachings, were in need of such a resource. For it was not

81 1 Cor. 14:22.







that divinity in the likeness of haughty men was to empty glory. But when he pities on account of salvation he comes in every manner. And He realized for us this thing which had been said. This is what God had said to Ezekiel, because Israel was swollen in its mind and turned back to stupidity. He spurred him and said thus:

Son of Man, go to the House of Israel and speak to them my words. Because it is not to a people which speaks obscurely, or (speaks) a difficult language. You are sent to the House of Israel, but not to people with varieties of voice or of a different language, and not to (people) who are heavy-tongued, whose words you do not understand.<sup>85</sup> If I had sent you to them, they would listen to you. But the House of Israel does not desire to listen to you. Because all of the House of Israel is apathetic and hardhearted. And lo I gave you a mighty face against their face and I will strengthen your victory against |60v<sup>o</sup>, col b| their victory. And it (i.e., the House of Israel) will co[n]tinually be stronger than flint. [Do] not [fear] them, and do not be terrified from [before] their faces, because they are a rebellious house.<sup>86</sup>

Cyriacus struggles with God and (also) those five or six *homunculi* in his retinue, despised in faith, corrupt in mind, whose contention Truth vanquishes, "for it is strong at all times and harder than flint, because they do not want to listen to me."<sup>87</sup> Thus we have heard the one who spoke to Ezekiel. To your wisdom, the lover of Christ, he will give a reward on account of your seething zeal in this world, and in the life to come to which there is no end, apart from with Him, there is nothing, no other kind of excellence, nor any everlasting reward. And we the humble ones never cease from offering up prayer for your sake. For the memory of the just men is of much advantage to those who keep them in remembrance. §

He laid his signature, that is, Unity in the Holy Trinity: for this is our God, may He guard your faithful wisdom as He performs these things which are beloved and pleasing to Him. And may He deliver you from every harm of the Devil, demons and evil people, and when your wisdom acts well, He will hold you worthy of the life to come, that is in the kingdom of heaven, through the prayers of the saints, amen. §

It has ended.

85 The text here is corrupt; translation suggested by Sebastian Brock.

86 Eze. 3:3–8.

87 Eze. 3:9.