

PART I

CONTESTED CONTEXTS

I

The History of Ancient Christian History

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When was the first history of ancient Christianity written? The answer of course is not so simple. For instance, one may think of Eusebius's *Historia ecclesiastica* (c.324) as the first account of ancient Christian history, covering the time of Christ up until the time of Constantine. However, the term *historia* in Eusebius's title implies "narrative" more than a modern notion of "what happened."¹ In other words, much depends on what is meant by the category of ancient Christian history, and so debate ensues about the nature of studying this subject.

The current state of studying ancient Christian history is contested. That is, scholars disagree about what has and should define this discipline, and in their reflections on said contested matters these same scholars usually focus on the post-World War II developments and debates.² The historical study of

¹ See Jeremy M. Schott, *Eusebius of Caesarea, The History of the Church: A New Translation* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), who contrasts ancient "historians" like Herodotus and Eusebius with the modern scientific understanding championed by Leopold von Ranke, "Vorrede," in *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* (Leipzig: 1885).

² Important examples include André Mandouze, "Mesure et démesure de la Patristique," *Studia Patristica*, vol. 3, ed. F. L. Cross (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1961), 3–19; Charles Kannengiesser, "Fifty years of patristics," *Theological Studies* 50.4 (1989), 633–56; Kannengiesser, "The future of patristics," *Theological Studies* 52.1 (1991), 128–39; Andrea Giardina, "Esplosione di tardoantico," *Studi Storici* 40 (1999), 157–80; Elizabeth A. Clark, "From patristics to early Christian studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7–41; Mark Vessey, "'La patristique, c'est autre chose': André Mandouze, Peter Brown, and the avocations of patristics as a philological science," in *Patristic Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Proceedings of an International Conference to Mark the 50th Anniversary of the International Association of Patristic Studies*, ed. Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, Theodore de Bruyn, and Carol Harrison (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 443–72; Averil Cameron, "Patristics and late antiquity: Partners or rivals?" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28.2 (2020), 283–302. Exceptions to this trend include Clark, *Founding the Fathers: Early Church History and Protestant Professors in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), who extends

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ancient Christianity, however, has a much longer history, and in order to better understand recent and current discussions it will help to offer a more comprehensive overview of past approaches. For one thing, it quickly becomes apparent that the state of studying ancient Christian history has often been contested, even since the earliest attempts. In order to appreciate this recurring aspect of the historiography of ancient Christianity, we will trace the developments of this field with a particular eye to the resources that were available at any given era. This will accomplish three goals. First, it will establish how past generations understood ancient Christian history and through what means, which can be beneficial for locating the contextual factors that affected previous historiography of ancient Christianity. Second, this survey will be able to trace the various ways that the historiography of ancient Christianity always entailed contest, debate, and dissent, which helps to reframe more recent debates about the nature of this field. Finally, by offering a more complete review of the historiography over the past two millennia, the current essay can assist future discussions about the nature, methodology, and aims of studying ancient Christian history.

While we cannot present an exhaustive account here of all historiography of ancient Christianity, we will offer a reflection on a series of examples that will help illustrate the history of studying ancient Christian history. In doing so, we will set the stage to trace important developments and trends. Therefore, in order to better situate where the present state of the discipline lies, in what follows we will begin at the beginning, even before Eusebius. Then, this discussion will quickly move to modern times, where much more attention to detail can be offered. These details will then bring us to the current state of studying ancient Christian history.

Ancient Beginnings

In one sense all ancient Christian documents represent attempts to preserve and understand early Christian history. Early Christians, for various reasons, documented sayings of Jesus (e.g., *Q* and *Gos. Thom.*), the events surrounding

her study to influential Protestant scholars of the prior century; and Michel Fédou, *The Fathers of the Church in Christian Theology*, trans. Peggy Manning Meyer (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019 [orig. *Les Pères de l'Église et la théologie chrétienne*, 2013]), whose opening section reviews the whole scope of Christian history, although he almost exclusively focuses on Catholic scholarship in the modern era.

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Jesus and his followers (e.g., the Gospels and Acts), and they communicated with one another in order to ensure proper interpretation of the *paradosis*, the early tradition handed down to them (cf. 2 Thess. 2:15 and other early Christian epistles). The collections of these texts, popularly thought of in terms of “canonization,” itself represents an act of historical data collection and archiving.³

This process of collective remembering and studying the past extended far beyond the texts that came to be seen as Scriptures. For example, the emergence of literature devoted to martyrs and saints, such as *acta*, *passiones*, and *vitae*, represent examples of Christians remembering and retelling their past.⁴ Soon the wider events of the Christian movement came under the view of Christian historiographers, like Eusebius, Socrates, and Sozomen.

As the centuries unfolded the *correct* telling of Christian history was as important, if not essentially the same thing as, teaching the correct doctrine. Even heresiologies can be seen to function as ways of controlling the historical narrative: Who is and is not a Christian? Who did and did not teach and practice Christian faith rightly?⁵ Conversely, “histories” written by chroniclers like those mentioned above were often driven by an agenda: to validate their party’s orthodoxy. In the wake of the Council of Ephesus (431), Vincent of Lérins famously defined true Christianity as *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*, or “that which is believed everywhere, always, and by all.”⁶ For Vincent and his party, the “always,” representing the history axis of the equation, is just as important as the “everywhere-by-all,” or what he would understand to be the catholic axis. Of course, Vincent writes at a moment when the definition of “all” is contested. Many at the time began distilling debates down to which Father could be cited. In the aftermath of Ephesus, for example, what exactly Cyril and other luminaries said and meant became a matter of eternal significance.⁷ Thus, the

³ Obviously, canonization involved many other factors. See David Brakke, “Scriptural practices in early Christianity: Towards a new history of the New Testament canon,” in *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation: Discursive Fights over Religious Traditions in Antiquity*, ed. Jörg Rüpke, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, and David Brakke (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 263–80; and Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴ See Chapter 16 in the present volume. ⁵ See Chapter 3 in the present volume.

⁶ *Commonitorium* 2.5 (CCSL 64:149).

⁷ Thomas Graumann, *Die Kirche der Väter: Vätertheologie und Väterbeweis in den Kirchen des Ostens bis zum Konzil von Ephesus (431)* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002).

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preservation and understanding of the transcripts from these councils themselves became matters of utmost importance.

In the centuries that follow, while innumerable treatises were written for specific debates, the authoritative teachings of the preceding Christians and the recording of what had “always” been believed was most commonly relayed through *catenae* (“chains” of comments on Scripture) and later through *sententiae* (collection of sayings), such as Isidore’s *Etymologiae* (c.630).⁸ Chronicles still flourished throughout the Middle Ages alongside these sentences, but just how the history axis of the chronicles and the catholic axis of the sentences intersected is complex, to say the least. Even works not devoted to retelling the ancient past retained a commitment to that past. Maximus the Confessor (c.580–662) insisted that proper Christianity is that of affirming “just what the Fathers taught us (ὡς οἱ Πατέρες ἡμᾶς ἐδίδαξαν).”⁹ This use of the “Fathers” was itself something Maximus inherited from earlier authoritative writers.¹⁰ The key point being that the Fathers *plural*, that is collectively, offered authority and validity to a given Christian teaching. Thus, the so-called ecumenical councils represented “the Church” *par excellence* because they claimed to be descended from ancient Christianity properly remembered. Of course, the records from these councils themselves belie a more complicated story: both sides of the iconoclast controversy, for example, could cite numerous predecessors for support.¹¹ In the centuries that follow, this contested claim to consensus will be challenged repeatedly.

Medieval Developments

A major development for how ancient Christian history would be interpreted came with Peter Abelard (1079–1142). Whereas most scholars of his day

⁸ Full treatises did still circulate in elite circles: cf. the example of Photius’s *Bibliotheca* (late ninth century), which summarizes 279 books read and discussed in Photius’s circle of friends while Tarasius, to whom the book is devoted, was apart from him. The book is not meant to be an index or summary of a set of authoritative texts, but it was often treated that way by early modern scholars needing attestation of certain writings (e.g., Bernard Schmid, *Manual of Patrology*, trans./rev. V.J. Schobel [St. Louis: Herder, 1899], 21).

⁹ *Ep.* 12 (PG 91:465).

¹⁰ John Meyendorff, *Le Christ dans la théologie byzantine* (Paris: Cerf, 2010 [1969 orig.]); ET = *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1975).

¹¹ See discussion in Óscar Prieto Domínguez, *Literary Circles in Byzantine Iconoclasm: Patrons, Politics, and Saints* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

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would inquire into the teachings of the past by simply finding support from what “the Fathers” in general taught (*quod ubique . . .*), Abelard published a set of 158 questions for which “sentences” from the Fathers were provided as answers. The answers to these questions, however, consisted of sayings from the Fathers in which some answered “yes” to the given question, while others answered “no.” Thus his title, *Sic et non*, and the scandalous notion that the past did not speak univocally but could be shown to answer both *Yes and No*. Abelard’s work implied that any given theological questions require answers based on reason, not merely historical precedence, and for this (and other sordid matters) he was repeatedly harassed.¹² Even so, generations that followed would continue to inquire beyond mere sayings from the past, and eventually look to situate those sayings in their own historical context. That is, scholars would soon have to look for the original rationale and to its applicability to the present. The need to make such interpretations, furthermore, meant that the history of ancient Christianity would be seen as a contested tradition.¹³

Another important factor in the Middle Ages was the need to defend Christianity from outsiders, so that the scholastic tradition often sought to demonstrate the validity of Christianity apart from recourse to past tradition – that is, through reason alone. Prominent examples include Anselm’s *Proslogion* (1078) and Thomas Aquinas’s *Contra Gentiles* (1265). This trajectory of thought takes us beyond the scope of the present volume and so cannot be pursued here. It should be noted, however, that this factor did decenter ancient Christian history in Christian theology and practice. What is pertinent is that some notion of “pure reason” will be important even for future historical studies. This was especially the case in the early Renaissance period.

A contributing factor to the rise of the Humanist movement was the debates about the role and validity of philosophy in relation to theology. While most humanists looked to ancient philosophical texts for their philological eloquence, some humanists had to defend their use of classical philosophical sources. In doing so, they looked to ancient Christian writers

¹² Jeffrey E. Brower and Kevin Guilfooy, *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹³ For more detailed treatment, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 3, *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600–1300)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

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like Justin Martyr who had done the same and served as precedents.¹⁴ This is not to say that Christian antiquity was simply a smoke screen for the Renaissance writers in their pursuit of “pagan” antiquity.¹⁵ And yet it is true that the growing awareness of corruption in the church’s hierarchy did lead the Humanists to adapt a pursuit of history thought to be objective and unencumbered by doctrinal or ecclesial commitments.

It will suffice to mention famous examples like Lorenzo Valla (1407–57) proving the *Donation of Constantine* to be a forgery in 1440,¹⁶ or the theological debates set off in 1516 when Erasmus removed the Johannine Comma from his edition of the Greek New Testament because he could not find any Greek manuscript containing it.¹⁷ These developments prompted the search for better manuscripts and raised awareness about the need for a more scientific and less subjective approach. For example, Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples produced new editions of early Christian texts, like the letters of Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna in 1498.¹⁸ These kinds of developments set the stage for and continued into the Protestant era.

The Reformation and Sectarian Approaches to History

The historical background that led to the Protestant Reformation is more than can be summarized here, but suffice it to say that the mentality set forth by Abelard and others further developed after Martin Luther challenged the church’s authority.¹⁹ Luther himself had to contest the interpretation of the formative centuries of Christianity that allegedly gave rise to certain Catholic teachings and practices, as is articulated most explicitly in his *Von den Conciliis*

¹⁴ Jill Krave, “Twenty-third annual Margaret Mann Phillips Lecture: Pagan philosophy and patristics in Erasmus and his contemporaries,” *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 31.1 (2011), 33–60.

¹⁵ Charles L. Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers: Ambrogio Traversari (1386–1439) and Christian Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977).

¹⁶ Salvatore I. Camporeale, *Christianity, Latinity, and Culture: Two Studies on Lorenzo Valla*, trans. Patrick Baker, ed. Baker and Christopher S. Celenza (Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 172; Leiden: Brill, 2014).

¹⁷ Grantley McDonald, “Erasmus and the Johannine Comma (1 John 5.7–8),” *Bible Translator* 67.1 (2016), 42–55.

¹⁸ See J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 5 vols., 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1889), 2.3:318; and Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 1975), 137–8.

¹⁹ For extensive treatment, see essays in Irena Dorota Backus (ed.), *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

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und Kirchen (1539). This Protestant approach to history would become a common one, and some saw Protestant Christianity as essentially one of properly using historical analysis in order to recover the ancient form of the faith. For example, in 1653 the work of Lutheran theologian Johannes Gerhard was published posthumously, entitled *Patrologia sive de primitivae ecclesiae Christianae doctorum vita ac lucubrationibus*. Gerhard claimed the Reformation was the proper retrieval of ancient Christianity, in effect making “Patrology” (a noun he coined) a form of sectarian apologetics for his day.²⁰ Another important example is Gottfried Arnold, who believed himself to follow in the line of Luther when he wrote *Unpartheyische Kirchen – und Ketzer – Historie* in 1699. Despite claiming to be “impartial” toward the tradition, as opposed to the dogmatic Catholic scholars, Arnold sided with the so-called heretics in seemingly every case. A less polemical Protestant polemicist was Remi-Casimir Oudin (1638–1717). He was a French monk, who after reading ancient Christian texts converted to Protestantism around 1717. Some of his influential publications include the three-volume *Acta sanctorum* (1701) and the three-volume *Commentarius de scriptoribus ecclesiae antiquis* (1722).

Several Catholic scholars offered their own studies of ancient Christianity in response to the Protestants. The French theologian Marguerin de la Bigne (1546–95) published ten volumes of patristic texts as a means of refuting Protestant use, or misuse, of them.²¹ Roberto Francesco Romolo Bellarmino (1542–1621), the Italian Catholic scholar, supporter of Trent, who was later made Cardinal, Saint, and Doctor of the Church, wrote *De scriptoribus ecclesiasticis* in 1613. Therein, he offered comments on the writers and works from apostolic times through the scholastics, with much of the focus on the early period.²² In a similar vein, Noël Argonne (1640–1704), the French theologian who took the name Bonaventure when he joined the Carthusian Order, wrote a brief guide to how to read the Fathers, entitled

²⁰ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 3 vols. (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1949), 1:1, credits him with coining the term “Patrology.” The term would later shift to mean the study of early Christian texts; see Fédou, *Fathers of the Church*, 15–16.

²¹ *Sacra bibliotheca sanctorum Patrum*, 9 vols. (1575–1579), as well as the works of Isidore of Seville (in 1580). Similar work was taken up by Fronton du Duc (1558–1624), with works focusing on the Greek writers from antiquity: namely, John Chrysostom (1609–1624); see his *Bibliotheca veterum Patrum*, 2 vols. (1624), which included an assortment of authors. More will be said about published editions below.

²² The work is mostly a catalogue, but like Jerome’s *Vir. ill.* (his model) he does offer judgments on the writers and texts.

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Traité de la lecture des Pères de l'Église in 1688. One could also mention here the work of Rémy Ceillier (1688–1763). He responded to Jean Barbeyrac, a Huguenot who had dismissed many of the early Christian writers for the lack of moral teaching.²³ Ceillier defended “the Fathers” in his *Apologie de la morale des Pères, contre les injustes accusations du sieur Jean Barbeyrac, professeur en droit et en histoire à Lausanne* (1718).²⁴ This spawned his later and lengthier (twenty-three-volume) history and defense of ancient Christianity entitled *Histoire générale des auteurs sacrés et ecclésiastiques* (1729–63).

Of course, not all Catholics agreed that there was an unbroken and unified line from the present papal decrees to the ancient Christian era. Jansenists, Catholics who taught strict Augustinian doctrine and were thought to be too Reformed by the magisterium, soon emerged and offered their own retelling of history. For example, Louis-Sébastien Le Nain de Tillemont (1637–98) wrote a monumental sixteen-volume work entitled *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique des six premiers siècles* (1698–1712).²⁵ This work was only outpaced by fellow Jansenist Louis Ellies Dupin (d. 1719), whose sixty-one-volume work covered sixteen hundred years of texts and history: *Bibliothèque des auteurs ecclésiastiques* (1686–1715).

There were similar debates internal to Protestants. While those of the so-called Radical Reformation often utilized a strict *sola scriptura* approach to theological debate, many leaders identified with this movement cited the early Christian writers in support of their views. Menno Simmons (1496–1561) claimed his fellow “Anabaptists” were the true heirs to the ancient Christian tradition: “verily Christ and his apostles, Cyprian and his bishops, the Nicene Council and the holy apostle Paul must verily also have been Anabaptists.”²⁶ Conrad Grebel (1498–1596) wrote enthusiastically of how he acquired Beatus Rhenanus’s 1521 edition of Tertullian’s works in the

²³ In the preface he wrote for the 1728 edition of Samuel von Pufendorf’s *Le droit de la nature & des gens* (1672 Latin orig.).

²⁴ After Cellier’s book, Barbeyrac wrote *Traité de la morale des pères de l’Eglise* (1728), which elaborated his original position, tracing the Christian teachings on morality, finding instances where their moral “truths” were in fact incorrect and thus needed reforming.

²⁵ See the response by Blaise Vauxelles (1651–1729), French Catholic who took the name Honoratus a Sancta Maria when he joined the Carmelites: *Animadversiones in regulas et usum critices spectantes ad historiam ecclesiae, opera patrum, acta antiquorum martyrum, gesta sanctorum*, 3 vols. (1712–20). This work’s influence is evidenced by its numerous reprints and translations.

²⁶ Simmons, “Reply to False Accusations 1552,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simmons*, ed. and trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 571. Although it should be noted that Simmons is quick to “assert that we do not believe in all their doctrine.”

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same year it was published.²⁷ Likewise, Balthasar Hubmaier (1480–1528) often looked to the “post-apostolic” writers for support of his teachings.²⁸ In response, these polemics drew the ire of the magisterial Reformers who offered their own non-Anabaptist (or non-“Donatist”)²⁹ interpretation of “the Fathers.”³⁰ A century later this kind of internal polemic can still be seen in Johann Fecht (1636–68), who, among other publications, wrote *Theses ex universa theologia patristica selectae* (1695), directed against Philipp Spener (1635–1705) and the Pietists.

This widespread rush *ad fontes* meant that many had to scramble to find the actual resources themselves. There were not yet good editions of ancient texts, and so many scholars, especially Catholics, began producing newer collections of sayings and excerpts from the early tradition.³¹ Many Protestants looked to Johann Karl Ludwig Gieseler’s five-volume *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte* (1824–57), which functioned for many as an anthology of ancient Christian authorities.³² The most influential Catholic resource was Heinrich Joseph Dominicus Denzinger’s *Enchiridion symbolorum et definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (1854) – a work that has gone through many editions, so that “Denzinger” is still in print to date.³³

²⁷ Conrad Grebel, Letter 40: “Grebel to Vadian (Zurich, end of October, 1521),” in *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism: The Grebel Letters and Related Documents*, ed. Leland Harder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985), 154–5.

²⁸ See especially Hubmaier, “Old and New Teachers on Believers Baptism,” in *Balthasar Hubmaier, Theologian of Anabaptism*, ed. and trans. H. Wayne Pipkin and John Howard Yoder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 245–74; and Andrew P. Klager, “Balthasar Hubmaier’s use of the Church Fathers,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84 (2010), 5–65. See further discussion and examples in Brian C. Brewer, “‘To defer and not to hasten’: The Anabaptist and Baptist appropriations of Tertullian’s baptismal theology,” *Harvard Theological Review* 106.3 (2013), 287–308.

²⁹ Jesse A. Hoover, “Capricious, seductive, and insurrectionary,” *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 3.1 (2016), 71–98.

³⁰ See Andy Alexis-Baker, “Anabaptist use of patristic literature and creeds,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 85 (2011), 477–504.

³¹ E.g., Dominic Schram, *Analysis operum SS. Patrum et scriptorum ecclesiasticorum*, 18 vols. (1780–96); Stephan Wiest, *Institutiones Patrologiae in usum academicum* (1795); Gottfried Lumper, *Historia theologica-critica de vita, scriptis atque doctrina SS. Patrum trium primorum saeculorum*, 13 vols. (1783–9); Franz Michael Permaneder, *Bibliotheca patristica*, 3 vols. (1841–4), a work never completed but which covered the first three centuries; and Joseph Nirschl, *Lehrbuch der Patrologie und Patristik*, 3 vols. (1881–5).

³² Clark, *Founding the Fathers*, 82. Gieseler’s *Dogmengeschichte* (1855, posthumously) is sometimes considered the sixth volume of his *Kirchengeschichte*.

³³ See Heinrich Denzinger, Robert L. Fastiggi, Helmut Hoping, and Peter Hünermann, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012).