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## THE COUNCIL FROM SERDICA (343) - CROSSING POINT BETWEEN WEST AND EAST

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**Key words:** council from Serdica, Oriental Church, Antiochia, Constantius.

**Riassunto.** *Al concilio di Serdica (343) l'imperatore Constans sperava di unificare i punti di vista diversi dei vescovi di Oriente con quelli dei vescovi di Occidente. Invece di trovare una soluzione della crisi, la maggior parte dei vescovi orientali raggruppati intorno al clero di Antiochia contro il vescovo alessandrino Atanasio hanno preferito di allearsi col imperatore Constantius. Questo compromesso fra religione e politico del gruppo di Antiochia ha cancellato le decisioni del concilio, quali al quel tempo sono stati ignorati. Tuttavia i canoni dalla Serdica sono ritrovati nei codici ulteriori della Chiesa Orientale. Finalmente, questi canoni possono essere utilizzati nei discussioni ecumenici contemporanei e rappresentano un „punto di collegamento” tra Occidente ed Oriente.*

**Abstract.** *At the council from Serdica (343), the emperor Constans hoped to unify the opinions of the Eastern and Western bishops. The bishops of east, regrouped around the church of Antiochia versus the Alexandrin bishop Atanasius, made an alliance with the emperor Constantius. The council's decisions were ignored for a long time, but they can be found in the ulterior codici of the Oriental Church.*

**Rezumat.** *La conciliul de la Serdica (343), împăratul Constans spera să unifice punctele de vedere ale episcopilor din Orient și din Occident. Majoritatea episcopilor din Orient, uniți în jurul clerului din Antiochia, se aliază cu împăratul Constantius împotriva episcopului alexandrin Atanasius. Hotărârile conciliului au fost ignorate multă vreme, dar ele figurează în codici ulteriori ai bisericii orientale.*

Approaching a religious subject during a colloquium dedicated to the relationship between eastern and western Europe may seem, at a first look, a dangerous initiative. However, the subject itself – the Council from Sardica (343) – belongs to a historical process of reciprocal probing between different political and religious entities which were components of a single unit called The Roman Empire.

The 4<sup>th</sup> century AD was considered by historians a crucial moment in the history of mankind. By becoming official as *religio licita* and by spreading all over the Roman territory Christianity created the premises for the organising of the Church. This evolution didn't escape the gaps created by the heretics. Their condemnation took place

during local and general synods. In the middle of such controversies there were also charismatic personalities such as Athanasius of Alexandria or Osius of Cordoba.

The dogmatic decisions initiated by the Church Fathers will not be much insisted upon; they have been dedicated large studies (RĂMUREANU 1962, 176-182; SIMONETTI 1975, 161-210; BARNARD 1983).

Relevant for this study is the context in which the synods met for the further evolution of the Christian church.

The religious disputes often interfered with the political and military ones. The rivalry between the emperors Constans – who became the ruler of the whole Occident (in April 340) – and Constantius II became sharper on the religious field too (ZEILLER 1918, 219-220; LIPPOLD, KIRSTEN 1959, 147-189; BRATOZ 1987, 149-196). The conflict occurred most of the time in the Danubian provinces. Thus, the reconciliation thought by both sovereigns as the only solution for the solving of the ecclesiastical problems in the Empire was to happen in a synod organised at “Sardica (which is situated in Illyricum, a city of the Dacians)” (Dacia Mediterranea) (THEODORET *HE* II, 4). Even if the initiative for the organising of this event belonged to Pope Julius (337- 352) (GESSEL 2001, col. 211-212; ROETHE 1937, 81-87) the gathering of the bishops from the Empire was the task of the sovereigns even from Constantin the Great’s time (LACTANTIUS 19, 6; THEODORET *HE*, 4, 6; OSTROGORSKY 1996, 5). There can be easily noticed the premises of a later division of the Church: two imperial capitals, two emperors, two churches. The variances between the religious centres of antiquity strengthened each time the political power interfered with ecclesiastical matters.

Sardica was not an exception either. The Church Fathers were to establish the instruments which could help to solve the religious conflicts without asking the supreme authority of the Roman state. But the political rulers of the time silently consented to the failure of the synod through supporting two separate groups corresponding to the western and eastern territory. The importance of this event for the Danubian areas remains however a considerable one, through the attendance of 170 participants at the council, almost half of them originating from Illyricum (CASPAR 1930, 131-165; RĂMUREANU 1962, 158-159). The presence in great number of bishops from Illyricum was favoured by the geopolitical factors, because “in Sardica they were somehow at home as the city was placed in the middle of the Moeso-

Dacian area” (PÂRVAN 1992, 48). There were mentioned among others Eutherius from Sirmium, Zosimos from Horreum Margi, Amantius from Viminacium, Vitalis from Aquae, Calvus or Salvus from Castra Martis, Valens from Oescus, Silvester from Ratiaria, Protogenes from Sardica, Gaudentius from Naissus, Valens from Mursa and Ursacius from Singidunum (PĂCURARIU 1992, 120; THEODORET *HE*, 8, 1; SOZOMENUS, *HE*, III, 12). The host of this meeting was the local bishop Protogenes, who had taken part in the council of Niceea as well (325). The presence of the cleric Osius from Cordoba (THEODORET *HE*, II, 15, 9; HESS, 1958, 10), coming from the part of the Western Church had the role of rendering more authority to the decisions of the council. The Danubian Arianism was represented by the two bishops Valens and Ursacius who, even from the council in Tyr had pronounced against the orthodox faith and against Athanasius (RĂMUREANU 1968, 23-28). Thus, taking into consideration the high percentage of Orthodox priests in comparison with the Arians, we might believe that Arianism was weakly represented in the Danubian provinces (SCHAFERDIEK 1978, 79-90).

Pretexting the celebration of Constantius' great victory against the Persians, the eastern bishops withdrew from the synod and continued separate discussions at Phillipolis (Plovdiv, Bulgaria). In the letter edited at the end of these synodic debates, the bishops condemned the Roman bishop Julius, *princepem et ducem malorum* (HILARIUS *Fragm.Hist*, B III, 27), they also condemned the bishops Ossius, Protogenes, Gaudentius and others who were charged of “bringing Marcel of Ancyra, Athanasius and other outlaws to communion” (HILARIUS *Fragm.Hist*, B III, 27; RĂMUREANU 1962, 163).

Consequently, the attitude of western bishops became radical as well: they decided the excommunication of Semiarian eastern clerics Gregory from Alexandria, Basil from Ancyra, Quintianus from Gaza, who had occupied their bishop's chairs “as the wolfs do” (*more luporum*). This was the starting point of a real “war” of declarations between the two parties which contributed to the total failure of the synod in Sardica. About the excommunication of the two “*princeps arianorum*”, the bishops Ursacius (Singidunum, Moesia) and Valens (Mursa, Pannonia) Theodoret wrote: “....not only that they shouldn't be bishops, but they shouldn't be worthy of communion with the Orthodox people” (THEODORET *HE*, II, 8). Their dispossession of the bishop's chairs could be done only with the tacit support given by Constantius II. During the council, the bishop from Aquileea, Frontinianus, a

member of the papal delegation, accused the bishop from Mursa of mixing in the internal problems of his episcopate (HILARIUS *Fragm.Hist*, B II, 2-4). The ignoring of the canons by the “heretic” priests had become a statal phenomenon, a problem which the political leader of Constantinople was quite aware of. The fact cannot be considered as the result of a preconceived plan, part of the Imperial religious politics, but more like the effect of the Emperor’ oscillating position not only concerning religious matters, but also military, political ones.

The synod from Sardica could have been succesful if the solutions proposed by the western episcopate had been steadily respected in the large and generous frame of the Oriental Roman world. In the synodic letter adressed to the church from Alexandria there were stated the principles of separating the political power from the religious one. Thus, the non-involvement of the public magistrates in ecclesiastical matters was to become a warranty for“ the confession in peace of the universal and apostolic faith” (ATHANASIUS *Apol. Contra arianos* 39). The 21 canons approved at Sardica settled also the procedures concerning the election of the bishops, their rights and obligations (ATHANASIUS *Apol. Contra arianos* 170-172; HESS 1958, 71-108). But, as it was mentioned before, the council decisions weren’t respected but regionally, in Illyricum and in the Occident. In the east, although taken over by the late canon collections (SIEBEN 1983, 501-534), the canons remained pure theory during the 4th century because of Constantius II pro-Arian politics.

The failure of the council from Sardica (343) was greatly due to the tacit support of the imperial power for the parties implied in the religious disputes of the time. The rivalries from the political area moved to the religious field, which damaged the unity of the Church. The lack of consistency in applying the canons in the whole area of the Roman Empire led to the estrangement of the religious centres of the time from one another and in the end to the final break in 1054.

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