

Johannes Cochlaeus: an introduction to his life and work

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Johannes Cochlaeus stands among the prominent members of the Catholic reaction to the Reformation during its first three decades. His work serves as valuable evidence for scholars of the division of western Christianity that took place in the sixteenth century. But two qualities give him a special place among the early Catholic respondents to Protestantism: the volume of his work and the rhetorical ferocity of his reaction to the beginnings of Protestantism. He was the most prolific and most acerbic of the Catholic polemicists, and both of these qualities in tandem give him a historical importance that is only now being recognized. While the *Commentary on the Life of Luther* has long been acknowledged to be Cochlaeus's most important work, Cochlaeus himself and his other works remain largely unknown, especially in the English-speaking world.¹

The early stage of Cochlaeus's career was one in which correcting errors in biblical interpretation seemed sufficient response to the new attacks on the old faith. But after the Diet of Augsburg of 1530, Cochlaeus's writings pursue a new theme. Whereas the preceding decade was focused on religious issues, in the 1530s the Reformers had drawn their princes' support to their cause, and in the eyes of Romanists like Cochlaeus the matter became a political as well as a theological one. From 1530 to 1539 Cochlaeus combined religious argument with political exhortation, impressing upon Catholic secular authorities the importance of recognizing the danger of tolerating the Protestants. Cochlaeus stands out among the controversialists in his combination of political and religious rhetoric. There is an obvious biographical reason for this. From 1528 he served as court chaplain to Duke George of Saxony, one of the most relentless opponents of reform among the German nobility. With the creation of political alliances like the Schmalkald Federation in 1529, the Reformation became an issue for public counsel. Cochlaeus, who as court chaplain had the ear of his duke, becomes through his writings of this period the theological counselor to the Catholic nobility throughout Europe.

This survey offers the reader of the *Commentary* an introduction to the main events of Cochlaeus's career and an assessment of his treatment of Luther. His career falls into three periods: from his youth to the beginning of his work as chaplain to the Duke of Saxony; the years in Meissen, when he was at his

most powerful as an opponent of the Reformation; and his final years in Breslau, during which he completed a program of writing intended to accomplish with books what he was unable to do as an individual. The lasting monument of this period, and indeed of his whole career, is the *Commentary*, a work that demands some introductory remarks as well.

1479–1527

Three things about Cochlaeus set him apart from his contemporaries and help account for his early work: his humble origins, his secular status, and his humanist interests. Cochlaeus's early career is a chronicle of an intellectual rising from the most inauspicious circumstances to highly auspicious ones at the turn of the sixteenth century. Born Johann Dobneck of humble parents in Wendelstein, a small town outside of Nuremberg, the young Cochlaeus (the name is a Latinization of Wendelstein) was entrusted, in the manner of the age, to his uncle Johann Hirspeck, a parish priest, for his early education. In 1504 Cochlaeus proceeded to the University of Cologne, where he received the baccalaureate in 1505 and the master's degree in 1507. He remained in Cologne to study theology and earned the title of professor.

Cochlaeus's training and inclination suited him well for the life of the humanist scholar, and he secured a position as rector of the St Lorenz School in Nuremberg, one of the thriving centers of Renaissance humanism north of the Alps. In Nuremberg, Cochlaeus prepared a Latin grammar, an introduction to music, an edition of the *Cosmography* of the first century CE geographer Pomponius Mela, and an edition, with his own commentary, of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples's Latin paraphrase of Aristotle's *Meteorology*, all within a two-year period.² He proved sufficiently trustworthy that Willibald Pirckheimer, Nuremberg's foremost example of the patrician humanist, sent him to Bologna as tutor and chaperon of his two nephews. While in Italy Cochlaeus pursued the study of law and of Greek, and received a doctorate in theology from Ferrara in 1517.³ His legal studies were more successful than his care of his young charges, for Pirckheimer broke off all contact with him later that year, displeased with Cochlaeus's restlessness and suspicious that he had used the boys' funds to pay for his travel expenses.⁴ He nevertheless made good use of his travels, and was ordained to the priesthood in Rome in 1518.

The circumstances surrounding Cochlaeus's entry into theological battle remain clouded by incomplete, ambiguous evidence. Investigations of a century ago suggested that Cochlaeus received his first pastoral assignment with the charge to attack Luther, and that his ferocity was, at least in part, motivated by desire for additional support from his patrons, who may have included the influential Fugger family from Augsburg.⁵ Cochlaeus was a deacon in Frankfurt, his first clerical position, when the Diet of Worms was held in 1521. He attended as an assistant to Crown Prince Richard von Greifenklau, and had his own debate with Luther – possibly by tracking him down at the inn where he was staying – the proceedings of which he published in 1540.⁶ It matters

little who antagonized whom at first; but it is certain that Cochlaeus's hatred of Luther stems from this encounter.⁷ Just as Luther was banned from the church by a papal bull in 1521, Cochlaeus was subsequently banned by the papal nuncio from entering into disputation with Luther. Cochlaeus ignored his ban as freely as Luther did; and his *Colloquy with Luther* later joined the Reformer's works on the Index of Forbidden Books.⁸

Cochlaeus found his *métier* in polemical work: to be on the attack against enemies of a great cause animated him, and being at the center of controversy was a source of satisfaction. His interest in vituperative rhetoric probably began before the outbreak of the Reformation, for in early 1517 he was polishing his Latin style by imitating the acerbic Verrine orations of Cicero.⁹ From the beginning, Cochlaeus displayed a tendency to magnify his own role in the course of events. In 1521, in the wake of the Diet of Worms, he boasts that the Lutherans have composed a collection of '*Acta Cochlaei*,' in which Cochlaeus stands up against Luther and responds forcefully to every heretical statement.¹⁰ Enjoyment of the support and companionship of the influential, which he first tasted in the Pirckheimer circle in Nuremberg, returned with heady intensity in the early years of the Reformation. 'I have never been busier,' he told Frederick Nausea, the Bishop of Vienna, in 1524; 'tomorrow I see the Cardinal of Mainz, and have many places to go after that.'¹¹ Among the places that drew him were Leipzig, where he participated in one of the first great colloquies of the Reformation, and Augsburg, where he was one of the so-called 'four evangelists' (with Nausea, Johann Eck, and Johann Fabri) commissioned to compose a Catholic response to the Lutherans' Confession. Toward the end of his life he did all he could to participate in the Council of Trent, but that was not to happen.¹²

The first decade of Reformation polemics is the period in which Cochlaeus most ardently defends the teachings of the Catholic tradition. A characteristic work of this decade is his defense of the idea that St Peter had lived and taught in Rome.¹³ Luther had questioned the Apostle's connection with Rome in the hope of deflating the Petrine claims that gave the Bishop of Rome primacy of honor and jurisdiction. In this work Cochlaeus is an historian rebuking a revisionist doctrine: the theologian and humanist scholar are one and the same here. Similarly, Cochlaeus serves both learning and dogma by providing editions of the decrees of early councils and statements by the first popes.¹⁴ Although motivated by apologetic interests, these works were honorable contributions to the return to the sources that marked the Christian humanism of northern Europe in the early sixteenth century. For the early Cochlaeus, the charges of the Reformers could be refuted by more complete understanding of the history of the early church.

Though ostensibly composed in the service of Christian humanism, Cochlaeus's writings were all too obviously designed to antagonize the Lutherans, and Cochlaeus himself antagonized his own clerical patrons with his zeal. Soon after the appearance of the tract on St Peter, Cardinal Aleander reproached Cochlaeus for his harsh rhetoric. Aleander felt that the Lutherans' cause was

fueled by popular anticlericalism, which would only be intensified if Cochlaeus continued his intemperate writing.¹⁵ Rather than softening his rhetoric in response to such threats, Cochlaeus grew more defiant and acerbic in his polemical writing, and would later taunt Aleander for wanting to make peace with the Reformers. News that Cardinal Aleander was moving in the direction of peace was scandalous enough to be part of his 1532 gossip with Frederick Nausea; and the moderating tendency of Nausea's own theology a decade later elicited Cochlaeus's scornful comment that 'I'd think you were now for peace.'¹⁶ No such suspicion would ever surround Cochlaeus.

1527–39, Meissen

Hieronymus Emser, a leader of the early Catholic reaction and an early target of Luther's scorn, was court chaplain to Duke George of Saxony when he died in 1527. Cochlaeus was his successor and strove to carry forward a program of steadfast defense of the Roman faith. The work involved preparing the writings of others for the press, sometimes at his own expense, as well as continuing to compose his own polemical works.¹⁷ His own writings included the occasional extended treatise, but more often during this period consisted of series of controversial statements and passages drawn from the Reformers' works, with refutations of each. *The Fascicle of Calumnies, Ravings and Illusions of Martin Luther against Bishops and Clerics* is typical of the genre.¹⁸ In this work Cochlaeus painstakingly classifies dozens of statements by Luther into these three outlandish categories, demonstrating why they are calumnies, ravings, or illusions, and indicating the offending statements' deviation from the Catholic faith. To this period also belongs Cochlaeus's best-known work behind the *Commentary* on Luther, the *Seven-Headed Luther*.¹⁹ The seven 'heads' are the various personalities Luther appears to have exhibited in his works: Doctor, fanatic, fool, church visitor, churchman, criminal, and Barabbas. In Cochlaeus's work the different 'Luthers' take part in a series of dialogues about various matters of doctrine and practice, each quoting passages from Luther's works – no two of which, however, seem to be in agreement. Convinced that Luther's own incoherence, if proved, will undermine his authority even among his followers, Cochlaeus presents an absurd collage of statements that do indeed reveal a maddeningly inconsistent Luther.²⁰ This work and the *Fascicle* are among the compilations from this period that served as sourcebooks for the polemical writings of the later Cochlaeus – and for the *Commentary* itself. There are few, if any, quotations from Luther's writing that do not match passages in these early efforts to have Luther refute himself with his own words.²¹

Cochlaeus's intention in these compilations is to let the Reformers refute themselves by proving to be unreliable guides in anything concerning the faith. He is unconcerned about context, development of thought, or later revisions of earlier statements made by any Protestant thinker. The fact that all the major Reformers amplify and refine their works is grist to the mill; what may have been nothing more than an author's clarification of a point is presented

as a self-contradiction. The effect is to shock the reader into recognizing that the Reformers are advocates not of sound doctrine but of inconsistencies. He wants to show that each Protestant theologian is both internally incoherent and in disagreement, in some point or another, with all the others. In contrast, his publications of Catholic works both ancient and recent are intended to show that the Roman church has taught the same essentials over time and is uniform in its teachings in the sixteenth century.

With the Diet of Augsburg Cochlaeus shifts his dominant theme. Cochlaeus was present at the Diet, and helped draft the Response that was suppressed on orders of the Emperor for being too harsh.²² If the Diet of Worms revealed Luther to be an obstinate heretic, Augsburg exposed the danger to the Empire posed by the Protestant Estates that presented their Confession. In Cochlaeus's mind, Protestant princes had been lured from the Catholic faith by the heretical theologians within their territories. Like the intended readers of works like *Seven-Headed Luther*, these princes would recognize the instability of the Reformers' teachings if it were revealed to them. Cochlaeus assumed this responsibility; and his works from 1530 onward make much of the disobedience of the Reformers. Works like *A Faithful and Peaceful Warning by Johannes Cochlaeus against the Faithless and Seditious Warning by Martin Luther to the Germans* attempt to reveal the duplicity and unrest lurking in Luther's counsel.²³ These works are supplemented by more editions of authoritative works by others, most of them contemporary rather than ancient, and disciplinary rather than theoretical.²⁴ If the posture of the early Cochlaeus toward the Reformers was that of one Christian humanist trying to correct another with sources that both acknowledged as legitimate, the stance of Cochlaeus in the 1530s was that of the defender of orthodoxy warning his superiors, secular and ecclesiastical, of the heretical and subversive character of the new religious ideas. The fact that from Augsburg onward the Protestants are in open opposition to the Roman church and Empire makes Cochlaeus's job a relatively easy one. If one presupposes a unified political and ecclesiastical realm, then it is a matter of simple logic that neither schismatics nor revolutionaries can be tolerated.

Cochlaeus had a gift for making enemies. But he was equally endowed with a gift for making friends. The intensity of his commitment won him influential allies. In the second stage of his career as a polemicist Cochlaeus forged strong relations among like-minded clergy, and attempted to create a powerful reactionary front among German Catholics. The movement included theologians like Johann Eck, patrons like the Polish archbishop Peter Tomicki and Duke George of Saxony, and printers like Cochlaeus's nephew, Nicolaus Wolrab. But lack of funds and moral support, as well as the conversion to Lutheranism of some of his partners (Wolrab in particular²⁵), kept the conservative wing from acquiring the strength its visionary imagined. And preparations elsewhere for the general council that would be held at Trent seemed to diminish the need for a definitive regional response.

Cochlaeus did his own part in preparing for the Council. Although a defender of the primacy of the papacy, and someone who believed that the Reformers

refuted themselves with their own contradictions, he felt that a general council was the only competent authority in matters concerning the church as a whole.²⁶ In 1535 he congratulated the new pope, Paul III, on his election, and recommended that he call a council.²⁷ But whereas other theologians in Germany prepared for the Council by meeting and seeking concord or at least recognition of irreconcilable differences, Cochlaeus felt that the task of the assembled hierarchy should be the condemnation of Protestantism and the restoration of Roman piety. Thus the 'elimination of discord' which all sought meant, for Cochlaeus, the elimination of the Reformers as the source of discord.²⁸ In his private writings as well, Cochlaeus strove to tarnish and darken the Reformers' reputations, bringing vernacular attacks on the papacy to the attention of his Italian correspondents.²⁹ During these years, when he is perhaps at the peak of his influence, he also begins an aggressive campaign to win an invitation to the Council.³⁰

1539–52, Breslau

For Cochlaeus personally, the most important event of the Reformation was the succession of Henry the Pious as Duke of Albertine Saxony in 1539. Henry was as weak as Duke George was strong, and as Lutheran as George was Catholic. For Cochlaeus, the fall of Albertine Saxony to the Reformation meant the loss of Germany's strongest bastion of the old religion. It also meant Cochlaeus's own exile from a center of Saxon power to the Silesian city of Wroclaw (then Breslau), in the eastern hinterlands that he had held in such contempt when satirizing Wittenberg. With the exception of some trips to participate in regional colloquies and a short stay in Eichstätt, not far from where he was born, Cochlaeus spent his last years in a city where, as his letters repeatedly reflect, he felt himself an outsider. It seemed an ignominious end to a career of service to his church.

The 1540s were certainly a time of troubles for Cochlaeus. By manipulating his patrons' sympathies he acquired a post as canon at the cathedral in Wroclaw. But he continued to struggle for support throughout the decade. He remained convinced that the conservative wing of the church would prevail, and was determined to serve the cause in any way possible. Such service had been made more difficult, however, by the move to Silesia (where he had few allies and little support from his bishop) and by increasing difficulty in finding printers for his work. Protestant and moderate Catholic literature had become far more profitable for the printing industry; polemical invective of the sort Cochlaeus excelled in had become too unpopular for printers to produce without subsidy from the author. In letters expressing abject and urgent need, Cochlaeus appealed to past and potential supporters for funds to buy paper and ink, hire typesetters, and pay for all other labor involved in producing defenses of the Catholic church. The fact that the reactionary wing had lost momentum in Germany was for Cochlaeus a sign that efforts needed to be augmented; at no point was Cochlaeus willing to capitulate to the interests of moderation. Their

dominance even among Catholic prelates meant, in Cochlaeus's view, that the Reformers' rhetoric was proving increasingly devious and influential.

Convinced that his view would be vindicated at the Council, Cochlaeus devoted much of the decade to defending the duty of councils to prosecute and punish heretics. He returned to his early interests and studies in law, drawing on everything from the earliest fragments of canon law to its most recent theorists, to insist that discipline rather than conciliation was the path that needed to be taken with those who had deviated from obedience to the church. And in order to ensure that all Protestants were included in the Council's proceedings, he expanded his canon of adversaries beyond Luther and Melancthon to include men such as Martin Bucer and Heinrich Bullinger.³¹

If the period 1530–9 was one for territorial rulers like Duke George of Saxony to come to the aid of the Roman church, the 1540s were time for action at the imperial level. Cochlaeus accordingly devoted his dozen years in exile to making imperial and papal powers aware of the disaster that would result if Protestantism continued to be tolerated. It was in this final stage that Cochlaeus achieved his full potential for reactionary rhetoric. In part, no doubt, because his own life was deeply affected by the political history of the Reformation, Cochlaeus tended to see the dangers of Protestantism as social and political and not as religious only. In Cochlaeus's mind, the difference between Catholic and Protestant was the difference between order and disorder; and his task was to make that difference so obvious that no rational person, and perforce no responsible Christian ruler, could choose disorder over order.

The Peasants' War gave the first indications that the danger posed by the Reformers' teachings extended beyond religious practice. For Cochlaeus, as for other polemicists, it hardly mattered that the person they held responsible for the Reformation was not directly the instigator of the 1525 rebellion.³² Luther was widely depicted as the patron of disobedience, and his repudiation of the peasants' insurrection seemed all the greater proof of his responsibility. And the horrific casualty figures of the Peasants' War were only a minor foretaste of the carnage that still awaited.³³

The Schmalkald War of 1547 fulfilled Cochlaeus's expectations. In contrast to the motley band of peasants and their opponents in 1525, the Schmalkald War was between the federation of Protestant territories and the Empire: it symbolized Reformation and Catholicism in their most organized forms. Moreover, the fact that the imperial forces of Charles V defeated the Protestant states indicated to Cochlaeus that the Catholics would prevail, that the Reformers would be utterly vanquished, and that the princes the Reformers had deceived would return with their subjects to the ancient faith. As Cochlaeus saw it, the late 1540s were no time for compromise, for complete victory was closer than it had been since the outbreak of troubles.³⁴

The introduction of the Reformation into Albertine Saxony, and his own subsequent move to Wrocław, convinced Cochlaeus even further that the Reformation was an evil needing complete eradication, no matter how harsh the measures taken to achieve that end may seem. Thus it fitted well into his

intention to depict Luther even more demonically than he had in the previous two decades. To Luther's intellectual incoherence and defiance of tradition, the themes of the 1520s and 1530s, was now added an almost diabolical obstinacy, an inability to accede to reason, church discipline, or the threat of punishment by civil powers. Cochlaeus seems to have felt that only force would be able to compel him. In an exhortation to the German princes supposedly written in 1522 but published in 1545, Cochlaeus described Luther as worse than the universally feared Turk:

Luther no longer wants to celebrate Mass, chant the canonical hours, or to have vigils, matins, saints' feast days, exequies for the dead, anniversaries, Lenten fasts, works of penance, or pilgrimages. What, by immortal God, could the most barbarous Turk do that could be worse to our religion? Who of the pagans has ever been so foreign to all divine praise and worship than Luther? Or what nation has ever been so barbarous as never to have any sacred things or priests?³⁵

In order to appreciate the portrait of Luther in the *Commentary*, it is necessary to recognize how earnestly and consistently Cochlaeus held the view that the Reformer was a person of colossal wickedness and impiety.

At the end of his life Cochlaeus was concerned that the moderating parties among the Romanists, who had prevailed since the Diet of Augsburg, would continue to seek unity with the Protestants. The imperial Interim issued at Augsburg in 1548 posed a dilemma for Cochlaeus. On the one hand, the Empire appeared to be acting in the best interests of the Catholic church: the Interim promised peace on Catholic terms. On the other, it recognized as valid a number of Protestant critiques of liturgical practice. Conciliation with the Protestants, in Cochlaeus's view, was tantamount to capitulating to those factions intent on destroying the church. In a letter to the poet Heinrich Glareanus, Cochlaeus states his fear that the Interim will become an 'iterum,' a repetition of the same sort of turmoil already suffered.³⁶ Unity and tranquility held only a specious attractiveness. In his most generous view of them, the religious moderates were the victims of the Reformers' siren call of consensus with the Catholic tradition. With rare pertinacity, Cochlaeus adhered to the view that Protestant appeals to unity and harmony were rhetorical lures intended to entrap the faithful, who would recognize the duplicity of the Reformers' professions only after the church was fatally compromised. From beginning to end, the Reformation was the work of the Devil acting through Wittenberg theologians together with their allies and princes; and it was Cochlaeus's self-imposed duty to expose this fact.³⁷

Some, indeed most, Protestant theologians rebelled against the Interim, and for a number of reasons. It was, first of all, an attempt to impose imperial law on sovereign territories, and thus an illegitimate incursion into the rule of the Protestant princes. Second, in seeking to steer a middle way between the rich liturgical life of the Catholic church, with its vestments, candles, relics, and shrines, and the severe rites of the Reformation churches, the Interim inevitably

displeased those Reformers who themselves felt that any inclusion of Romanist 'idolatry' was corrupting to piety. Theologians like Andreas Osiander, Matthias Flacius, Philip Melancthon, and John Calvin all responded, with varying degrees of harshness, to the Interim, and thereby gave Cochlaeus material for the final battle of his life.³⁸ Although he himself remained opposed to the Interim, he was able to attack the Protestants' rejections of it as being one more instance of their disobedience and obstinate persistence in erroneous positions. In his attack on Calvin's response to the Interim, Cochlaeus denounced the 'nefarious and seditious preachers and leaders of sects, despisers of all powers ... who vomit and excrete impious and notorious books in German, mostly in Thuringian and Saxon towns, against that ordinance issued with Imperial authority that they call the Interim.'³⁹ Neither acceptance nor rejection of the Interim could satisfy him.

Old and ill, exhausted by his efforts for the church and hurt by their lack of recognition, Cochlaeus spent his final years trying to serve his cause with books. Between 1545 and his death in 1552 Cochlaeus strove to publish everything he had written, a body of work of extraordinary volume and range. Collections of occasional tracts like the *Miscellanies on the Cause of Religion*, the massive *History of the Hussites*, and the present *Commentary on the Life of Luther* appeared during these years.⁴⁰ And to remind his contemporaries of his efforts since the beginning of the Reformation, he issued a bibliography of his works, the whole corpus separated into German and Latin and listed chronologically. At the end are listed five titles from his early juristic and humanistic studies, and eighteen polemical works 'written in German and never published'; all are apparently lost.⁴¹

The *Commentary*

Although most of it was written by 1534, as he tells his readers at the end of that year's chronicle, the *Commentary* on Luther is the monument of the final stage of Cochlaeus's career.⁴² He boasted to Cardinal Marcello Cervini (who would become pope in 1555 as Marcellus II) that many have been pleased with it, and he intended to translate it into German.⁴³ Sending a copy to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, grandson of Pope Paul III, Cochlaeus described his work as being 'not temerarious or without cause, but by necessity, especially because the majority of persons living today think, by the crudest of errors, that Luther was a good man and his gospel was a holy one.'⁴⁴ The publication of the *Commentary* was Cochlaeus's attempt to keep the memory of the 'real' Luther alive and to counteract tendencies to ignore faults and over time to idolize the man. It is at the same time a chronicle of Cochlaeus's work of thirty years, an effort to preserve, after his own death, a record of his efforts to combat Luther and his influence. What Cochlaeus could not achieve while Luther was alive, the posthumous Cochlaeus might be able to accomplish against the memory of the departed Luther.

Cochlaeus's hopes for this book were fulfilled abundantly. Four centuries of

Catholic historiography reproduced the image of Luther delineated in the *Commentary*.⁴⁵ No Catholic scholars between the sixteenth century and the great mid-twentieth-century theologians Joseph Lortz and Erwin Iserloh knew Luther's work as intimately as Cochlaeus did; and only in recent decades has there been a desire to return to the disputes of the Reformation era and scrutinize the sources. For historical information and theological insight from a neglected viewpoint, as well as the occasional rhetorical barb, few texts of the sixteenth century call for historical recovery more than the *Commentary*.

Cochlaeus's *Commentary* is unique and original in its contribution to the Luther heresiography.⁴⁶ If a hagiographer's task is to record his subject's virtuous life, miracles, and piety in order to convince the reader of his subject's sanctity, the author of a heresiography sets about to present his subject's errors, vices, and dangers in order to reveal his sinister character. But anyone who chooses to attack Cochlaeus on purely technical grounds, and argue that he is careless with the evidence available to him, will have a difficult task. Cochlaeus exploits his opponents' texts and historical tradition with scrupulous accuracy in his quoting both bodies of material. He knew, as the hagiographer knows, that the account loses validity if it is factually inaccurate.

Cochlaeus is the heresiographer *par excellence* among Reformation-era Catholic controversialists. He differs from many of his contemporaries in the importance he gives to the lives of his antagonists. Heresy for him is not a set of erroneous ideas to which the unwary might be exposed, but a tool in the hands of wicked persons who seek to corrupt others. Thus the heretic takes on as much importance as the heresy itself in Cochlaeus's work. His historical and biographical interests go back to his early excerpt from the Hussite chronicle of Albert Krantz, and continue through to the *History of the Hussites*.⁴⁷ Luther was the perfect figure for this sort of treatment, not simply because of the notoriety of his teachings or the scandalousness of his life, but also because of the strength of his personality. Luther did not shrink from the public eye; in fact he put parts of his own life on view. In his public boldness and in drawing the world's attention to certain aspects of his private life, Luther virtually invites his opponents to attack him personally.

Since, for Cochlaeus, the Reformation is a conflict of divine and diabolical elements, he tends to depict its leaders in heroic terms. Jan Hus and his accomplices are portrayed as larger-than-life enemies of religion in Cochlaeus's *History of the Hussites*. Likewise, Cochlaeus depicts Luther as a colossal figure, a person uniquely able to wreak havoc in the social and ecclesiastical realms.⁴⁸ By presenting the deeds and teachings of heretics in the most sinister light possible, Cochlaeus is able to demonstrate the complete unacceptability of their work as guides for doctrine. One senses when reading the *Commentary* that Cochlaeus writes from a close knowledge of Luther and his works. Moreover, Cochlaeus sets Luther within a context with which he was intimately familiar: the world of the colloquies, diets, and religious disputes formal and informal that mark the stages of the development of Protestantism in its first decades. Cochlaeus's *Commentary*, because of its thoroughness and accuracy, is in fact a

uniquely valuable source for historians of Reformation-era Catholicism. As with hagiography, heresiography must be grounded in detailed and absolutely certain knowledge of the subject being described.

In addition to being an exposé of Luther's teachings and a chronicle of efforts to suppress it, the *Commentary* provides an unusually thorough account of Luther's life before 1534, especially when we recognize how little of the private Luther Cochlaeus would have known. Luther's life and character are as important as his thought and writings for Cochlaeus. In Cochlaeus's view, the moral worth of persons and the value of their teachings are connected, and connected so closely that would be impossible, almost by definition, for a wicked person to have a legitimate thought. Observations about the personal character of most of his opponents loom large in Cochlaeus's work and supply much of his polemical armament. The Reformers' rejection of clerical celibacy he saw not as a theological point but as an indication of their moral values; and repudiation of vows of celibacy for marriage stood as proof of their weakness of the flesh. Thus, although one may at first be tempted to see Cochlaeus's preoccupation with the lives of his opponents as an irrelevance unrelated to his theological argument, in Cochlaeus's mind the morality of his adversaries automatically undermines their teachings. It is not for nothing that Cochlaeus regularly contrasts Luther with the chaste and temperate lives of his clerical colleagues. The refutations of specific arguments that one finds in Cochlaeus's works are almost redundant reinforcements of the principal thrust of his rhetoric.

Yet there is theological exposition and refutation here; the work is after all a polemical account of a thinker's teachings. Although Cochlaeus may himself have been outmatched in theological dexterity by his Protestant adversaries, he still felt superior to them in learning. He delights in exposing gaffes in logic or biblical interpretation by his adversaries. And throughout the *Commentary* as well as in his other works he contrasts the Reformers' obtuseness with the erudition of his fellow Catholic theologians. Thus Cochlaeus's Catholic contemporaries stand in contrast to Luther and his colleagues not only in purity of life but in learning and intellectual subtlety as well. Cochlaeus delights in the stark contrast; and, either implicitly or explicitly, a pious and erudite counterpart to Luther is present at every stage of the *Commentary*.

In presenting the contrast between the impious Luther and his own pious and learned colleagues, Cochlaeus hopes the reader will recognize the absurdity of the juxtaposition and reject Luther's example and teachings. But the polemical goal of the *Commentary* can only be achieved if the reader feels that Luther is being presented honestly, fairly, and objectively. The merest hint of theological persuasion would undermine the work as a whole. The *Commentary* is thus, in the end, a work of delicious irony: a work covertly serving the most extreme polemical ends, while ostensibly a balanced and factual account of the life of a profoundly influential religious leader.

As much as modern scholarly sensibilities may recoil from the image of polemic being presented as objective biography, we must recognize that there

was no strict separation of fact and judgment in the minds of Reformation-era historians. The conjunction of these two categories is seen nowhere more clearly than in Conrad Braun's essay on writing history, which appears as one of the prefatory documents to Cochlaeus's *Commentary*.⁴⁹ Braun, a priest and a jurist, was the author of several weighty treatises on heresy and sedition, and Cochlaeus was instrumental in publishing them.⁵⁰ History, according to Braun, teaches one to compare past with present and to draw conjectures that may help in predicting the future; it is thus most useful as a moral guide in the political realm.⁵¹ In order to preserve peace and stability, ecclesiastical and secular authorities need the guidance of history in identifying heresy and extirpating it; and just as the historical record offers help in doing this, so does it reveal the dire consequences of failing to eliminate heresy.⁵² For Braun, the chief value of history in his own day is its ability to reveal the similarities between Jan Hus and Martin Luther, similarities which will convince all loyal Catholics that the Lutherans are to be dealt with in the same way as the Hussites had been: condemned and rendered disordered and leaderless, their master executed as heretical and seditious.⁵³ Unfashionable as it proved to be in the middle decades of the century, that radical treatment was the prescription unfolded in Braun's juristic work. As a result, in Braun's view we should see the *Commentary* and Cochlaeus's twelve-book *History of the Hussites* as the twin panels of a diptych, together forming a thousand-page brief to the authorities against the dangers of Protestantism.⁵⁴ The absence in the *Commentary* of sustained rhetorical denunciation, which Cochlaeus's other writings lead one to expect, is understood once one recognizes that the *Commentary* is the presentation of factual evidence rather than concluding judgment. The judgment is drawn from the larger body of works by Braun and Cochlaeus from 1548–9.⁵⁵

Cochlaeus makes this point in a letter to Ercole d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, that accompanies Braun's essay and introduces the *Commentary*. Recalling his own student days at Ferrara (and appending the citation of his doctoral degree), Cochlaeus tells his noble patron that he has left the judgment of Luther to the reader.

My concern was to report truthfully the things that would allow the present age to understand how far from the limits of Evangelical teaching, from obligatory obedience, and from the unity of the church Luther and his accomplices have conducted themselves, written, and preached against the law of charity and against the most certain precepts of Christ and Paul his apostle; with nefarious plots and subterfuge and with no concern for consequences they have disrupted the entire world with discord and the most horrifying doubts about the Christian faith and religion... And may pious posterity learn from this to resist new dissensions of this sort quickly when they occur, to capture the predators when they are still small, before they become strong and aided by sedition, when they cannot be caught without great harm or calamity.⁵⁶

Perhaps the most eloquent evidence of the purpose of the *Commentary* is found at the end of the 1549 edition. The Edict of Worms, with which the new Emperor, Charles V, condemned Luther in 1521, is reproduced at the end of Cochlaeus's massive tome, supplemented only by marginal notes pointing out Luther's criminality and impiety.⁵⁷ For Cochlaeus the Edict represented imperial business still pending, an emergency measure, taken for the sake of the people, whose urgency had increased rather than diminished in the intervening years – as the *Commentary* sought to demonstrate.⁵⁸

The fact that the *Commentary*, taken without its highly charged peripheral matter, may have been intended as a presentation of factual evidence in a case against Luther gives it a readability that more overtly polemical works, by Cochlaeus and others, do not possess. Whatever Cochlaeus's intentions, one learns much about Luther – about his works, his life, his public deeds – from this biography. The narrative after 1534, in which Cochlaeus limits himself to listing Luther's writings, is an astonishingly impressive picture of heroic energy applied to a daunting cause.⁵⁹ And Cochlaeus's record of his own efforts to combat Luther and his influence strikes the modern reader with almost as much force. If Cochlaeus fails to emerge in this chronicle as Luther's equal, it is surely due in part to Cochlaeus's own larger-than-life portrayal of the Reformer. The three first decades of the Reformation come across in these pages as a period of titanic struggle for the souls of Christian believers; and the *Commentary*, possibly more than any other work by a Catholic author, stands as an eloquent record of that struggle.