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BOOK REVIEWS

Constructing Saints in Greek and Latin Hagiography. Heroes and Heroines in Late Antique and Medieval Narrative, edited by Keon de Temmerman, Julie Van Pelt & Klazina Straat. Turnhout: Brepols, 2023. 182 pp. ISBN: 978-2-503-60282-0

L'histoire comme elle se présentait dans l'hagiographie byzantine et médiévale / Byzantine and Medieval History as Represented in Hagiography, edited by Anna Lampadaridi, Vincent Déroche & Christian Høgel. (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia 21). Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2022. 246 pp. ISSN 0293-1244 ISBN 978-91-513-1375-7

The academic study of hagiography has long seemed a contradiction in terms. These volumes, stemming from recently funded projects that have favoured European-wide networks of collaboration, show the profitable results of what is at first view an unlikely engagement. Both volumes, though slightly different in approach and results, engage with this question of appropriateness as they tackle the fundamental issue of the relation between history and hagiography. The historical positivism that dominated earlier generations of scholars, including some Bollandists, has given way to more nuanced and considered perspectives. Signalled by the word "narrative" in *Constructing Saints* and researched in its modes of embeddedness in those narratives in *L'histoire,* postmodern history is no longer an agglomeration of objective facts, but a polyhedric reality that relates simultaneously to all human dimensions: the political, the anthropological, the social, the temporal and spatial. What emerges from taking all these dimensions into account is the perhaps surprising realization of their vital co-presence in individual and collective lives of saints from ancient times. Nor does the verdict of their assessment need to be univocal, as the geographical and temporal spread, and the nature of the collections and their manuscript transmission allow for the co-existence of different interpretations, as the authors or compilers pursued different aims at different times and places. In the restricted space of this review, I will highlight some of the threads that I found most fruitful

in selected articles and attempt to establish a conversation on certain themes across the volumes. Since all the contributors are recognized scholars in the field, the quality is uniformly high and no special critical remarks need to be made.[1]

Does the study of hagiography in terms of narrativity help to disentangle it from the exigencies of historicity that have so far strangled more profound analyses of the text themselves? In his introduction to *Constructing Saints,* Koen de Temmerman seems to come half-way towards a positive answer. Wishing to save both aspects, he formulates the following definition: "... hagiographers do not construct their heroes purely from their imagination (as authors of fiction do) but reconstruct them from legendary or historical material." (p. 21) But is this distinction between authors of fiction and hagiographers justifiable? The subtleties of the hagiographical discourse, single or collective, emerging from these volumes show that these 'writers' were highly skilled entertainers responding to individual audiences, local needs and specific requirements in the packaging and repackaging of the same successful plots, with the same (or slightly different) heroes (and, especially, heroines). As the study of intertextuality and intermediality has shown, any creative achievement depends in turn on a tradition that has churned reality in a transformative way, to make the new production into a significant piece of communication with the world. Any number of examples discussed in the volumes bear out this observation, but the concept is perhaps best conveyed by Virginia Burrus's unfailingly masterful study of Constantina (*Constructing Saints*, pp. 157–172). A set of texts is necessary to show how "complexly interrelated, mutually confirming, and contesting literary depictions are produced through a process of textual fragmentation and recombination, constriction and expansion", so that this "fluid field of hagiographic textuality … yields no single, stable authoritative Life – hence no single, stable, authoritative Constantina." (p. 158, in reverse order) A parallel case to these transformations is the

[1] A few typos occur in both volumes. Note that *L'histoire*, p. 101, ascribes to Belting the 2021 book by Roland Betancourt, *Performing the Gospels in Byzantium*; at *L'histoire*, p. 207, 'Basile II' should be 'Basile I'. Both volumes have an index, *L'histoire* also includes an index of manuscripts.

curious anecdote of the temptation of Saint Philosophos by a prostitute, the subject of Stratis Papaioannou's study in *L'histoire*. Papaioannou, however, is reluctant to let go of the principle of searching for some hypothetical *Urtext*. The result is a missed opportunity at penetrating the workings of an odd tale, that would do much to dislodge false impressions of saints as paradigms of sanctity when seen with critical eyes (as Mary-France Auzépy remarks in *L'histoire*, p. 66–67, even positivists are extremely reluctant to carry their skeptical principles through to their logical consequences when dealing with hagiographies). Papaioannou is sensitive to the liturgical contextualization of the text's performance, but appears to perceive it more as a constraint than an opportunity for extended dialogue.

Saint Constantina also offers the occasion to open another thread that I perceive as central in the understanding of the hagiographical phenomenon and its discourses, namely, that of orality. As Burrus highlights, "the Life depicts Constantina as not merely erudite but heroically triumphant precisely by virtue of her facility with language. … in her very eloquence, Constantina invites erotic submission rather than moral imitation … Constantina may be heroic precisely to the extent that she is *in*imitable, set apart from the normal run of humanity." (p. 168) The rediscovery of vocality – and attendant aurality – of virgin martyrs is pursued in the study by Ann Alwis (*Constructing Saints*, pp. 79–104) of a thirteenth-century metaphrasis of the Life of St Tatiana and St Ia. Alwis shows that these women were ultimately valued for their rhetorical skills and convincing eloquence, that impacted infidels and emperors alike. The women's voices emerge against a perceived background of objectification, subordination, and sexual exploitation of women, showing that where women can be heard and find a place as teachers and preachers, that threat is correspondingly diminished.

A comparable trajectory may be extracted from Daria Resh's excellent study of the versions of the legend of Saint Barbara (*L'histoire*, pp. 133–148). While the plot revolves around Barbara's affirmation of control over her own sexual destiny, both against *patria potestas* and societal conventions, Resh engages with the versions to find out how each presents the story by highlighting its oral performativity for an audience

to different degrees. Framed by theoretical underpinnings in the work of medieval literary critic Antony Spearing, Resh retraces narrative modalities that in turn hide or foreground the oral performativity of the story. From a narrator-less text that she sees imbricated in "deliberate *writtenness*" (p. 136) through denial of a specific perspective, she turns to the highly individualized portrait of Barbara by (attributed to?) John Damascene where the theatrical mise-en-scène of the story is portended (in ambiguous and intriguing counterfactuality) during the liturgical performance of the verses of his laudatory composition. Finally, she comes to later medieval versions that take the narrative back in to the hands of an omniscient speaker, who steers the course of the recitation more decidedly and adds comments to the proceedings. Very cleverly, the visual and oral exclamations of the narrator (Look!, Hear!) are compared with marginal glosses in manuscripts, placing the two worlds – written and spoken – in a most urgently needed conversation.

Resh's emphasis on performance, which we somewhat misleadingly refer to as 'liturgy' (given current experiences and expectations), is well matched by the entertaining and reflective article by Piet Gerbrandy (*Constructing Saints*, pp. 105–122), where the nuts and bolts of the bardic tale of the Life of St Gallus are playfully exposed in the overtly self-effacing game of the author, Notker Balbulus, and fellow monks. Rather than dismiss the dialogic frame and the humility claims of the author as topoi, Gerbrandy delves into the dynamics of a text that publicly exposes its process of creation effectively as a reflection on its own fictionality and performativity. While Notker's activity is at once that of bardic singer and of verse writer, a more poignant polemic between these forms of communication, with respect to God's divine revelation, emerges from the Life of Gregorios Thaumatourgos by Gregory of Nyssa, as presented by Dimitris Kyrtatas (*L'histoire*, pp. 15–30). Again abandoning the well-trodden path of historical veridicity concerning the documentary inscription related to the saint's creedal formulation, Kyrtatas lands in the middle of a similar debate between written documents and the trustworthiness of the voice of God (see esp. p. 23).

A special place in my personal interests is occupied by the Life of Saint Pancratios of Taormina (*BHG* 1410), whose passages about ima-

ges are competently and thoroughly researched by Anna Lampadaridi (*L'histoire*, pp. 75–102), at once author of this substantial article and of the nuanced and helpful introduction to the volume. The dating of this Life to the period before iconoclasm is based on internal (but tenuous) evidence and preserves the place of the Life of St Stephen the Younger as the only contemporary hagiography from the period of the controversy (see Auzépy in *L'histoire*, pp. 63–74). Intertexting with an early Christian apocryphon, the Acts of John, a text definitively condemned only at the iconodule council of Nicaea II in 787 CE, the Life contains a pro-image message couched in the narrative of the Christianization of Sicily by two apostles, Pancratios and Marcianos, entrusted by Saint Peter with images of both Christ and of himself. Lampadaridi considers the Greek background to this didactic use of images for evangelisation, which finds a direct and perhaps more famous counterpart in Gregory the Great's famous dictum of art as the book of the illiterate. The Life provides a wealth of details about image-making, including the mention of a named artist, Joseph, and a description of folded parchments (*membranas*) where sketches of wall paintings ordered by Peter as church decoration were copied by the bishop for divulgation thus 'authorizing' the subject-matters for further representation, rather than the other way around as might have been expected (see p. 82). The emphasis on an ordered arrangement of scenes from the Life of Christ undercuts their derivation from text, where a sequential narrative naturally underpins the story. The possibility that 'liturgical' scenes were depicted in no particular order to begin with, as independent tableaux, is therefore mooted (as in scenes on early Christian sarcophagi, sometimes even 'mixing' what we distinguish as Old and New Testament subjects). I also wonder whether the paratactic juxtaposition of image and cross (e.g. in the list at p. 92) should be read as pointing to an iconic cross that displayed the body of Christ on it, given the importance that using this representation received at Nicaea II. Lampadaridi's adherence to the text and its vocabulary is a precious reminder that hagiographies cannot be studied merely by reference to plot. They are crafted as literary works where each word acquires a specific valence in the often highly controversial panorama that surrounds the reading and performative staging of saints'

lives. It is this profound connection between texts, images, and didactic performances that Lampadaridi so well focuses on. As she sharply summarizes it, "L'expérience visuelle participe à la transmission du message chrétien. Elle est étroitement liée à la liturgie, à la dramaturgie du rite byzantin qui se déploi dans l'église toute entière comme une scène.» (p. 83 and n. 30)

This summer my family took a trip to Trondheim (medieval Nidaros), Norway, where the feast of Saint Olaf is regularly celebrated on 29th July. Within a festival of art, crafts, music, and liturgy, we attended a musical recreation of the travels of the reliquary of St Lucy across Europe, where an actor-narrator's witty and entertaining words alternated with music and song to recreate a story. Days later we visited nearby Stickelstad, the battlefield where Olaf Haraldsson was killed, and where his memory lives on in a yearly outdoor re-enactment of the event, on a purpose-built stage in a wooden amphitheatre. A cycle of paintings from the 1930s helps the local guide explain the events of the king's career, his death, and his miracles. Unlike the Synaxarion's summaries about Byzantine kings, no aspects of Olaf's career are omitted, including his early years as a marauding Viking. Reading Steffen Hope's revisiting of the Olaf saga (*L'histoire*, pp. 31–60) and its connection to the Byzantine Varangian guard acquired a special resonance: the saintly king is clearly still regarded as a national hero. Hope succeeds in the difficult task of retracing the diffusion of a specific legend about the battle of Berrhoia, where the saint came to the Emperor's help and attained victory for him over the Pechenegs, as celebrated from scaldic poems to liturgical anthems. His conclusions are similar to Burrus's in acknowledging the fluidity of legends and their dependence not only on historical circumstances, but more specifically on political aims.

Politics and anthropology are aspects that the study of synaxarial collections as a whole also foregrounds for Sophie Métivier (*L'histoire*, pp. 199–218) and Paolo Odorico (pp. 219–240), both of whom grapple with the question of selection and inclusion in the year-long Constantinopolitan assemblage of saints´ lives, the Synaxarium Sirmondianum published by Hippolyte Delehaye. Specifically, Odorico questions Dagron's understanding of the sanctity of Byzantine Emperors, trying to

discern other criteria for admittance to what he considers an official, approved pantheon. Like Charis Messis in his pointed study of 'Emperor Maximian' across synaxarial notices (*L'histoire*, pp. 105–132), Odorico considers these texts as tracing a version of the history of Byzantium, whose roots in the Roman Empire remain visible in settings and names, helpfully detailed in Métivier's contribution. But many more collections await publication. Besides the necessary work of editing and translating, it is precious to benefit from these kinds of theoretical reflections that expand the framework in which to understand new materials. There is much need for both kinds of studies, so that it is my hope that the current flourish of hagiography-related projects will continue and never run dry. I recommend these two volumes to any medievalist wishing to get up to speed with the current trends in this field of study.

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