

## BOOK REVIEW

Timothy D. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010. Pp. xx + 437. ISBN 978-3-16-150226-2. €29.00.

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It was, as Timothy Barnes reveals in the preface to this latest volume, at the suggestion of his mentor Sir Ronald Syme that he first trained his critical Roman historian's eye on the records of early Christian saints and martyrs (with the rigorous results documented in 'Pre-Decian *Acta Martyrum*', *JTS* n.s. 19 (1968) 509–33). Fittingly, when invited to give the Ronald Syme Memorial Lecture in Oxford in 1995, Barnes chose the title 'Hagiography and Roman History', and the inspiration for the present book was born. Its more immediate catalyst was a series of lectures delivered in German at the University of Jena in 2008, which in a revised form constitute the bulk of the volume: the primary aim (according to the preface, pp. x–xi) is 'to describe how Christian hagiography began in the second century as the commemoration of martyrs, but became a vehicle for deliberate fiction in the fourth century and then a normal mode of literary composition.'

In keeping with the intention to chart the development of hagiography, the book's structure is chronological: the first five chapters (the revised Jena lectures) move from the apostolic era to St Martin of Tours in the fourth century; these are followed by two additional chapters on material from the early Byzantine period (fifth and sixth centuries), and on the emergence of 'modern' critical hagiography, and by nine substantial appendices of supporting material. Ch. 1 follows Bowersock in arguing that the Christian concept of martyrdom (strictly understood in the usage of Greek vocabulary) is not securely attested before Polycarp (AD 157), but explores manuscript evidence that the terminology may already have been known to Ignatius of Antioch more than a decade earlier. Close textual examination also uproots some traditional aspects of the deaths of Peter and Paul: the former was not crucified, but burned alive (the true import, it is argued here, of the allusion to the mode of his death in John 21:18–19); the latter perished not in Rome, but in Spain ('the limits of the West' in I Clement 5). In this chapter too Barnes establishes from two passages of the text of Revelation that the last book of the Bible can only have been written in the winter of AD 68–9.

Ch. 2 examines authentic hagiographical material up to the persecutions of Valerian, demonstrating the heterogeneous nature of documents traditionally and misleadingly lumped together as ‘acts of the martyrs’: in fact on closer inspection an assortment of court records, letters written to other churches, literary accounts of martyr deaths, and in one case (the so-called *Vita Cypriani*) actually a commemorative speech delivered on the first anniversary of its hero’s death. This last is one of a group of texts put under the microscope here to shed fresh light on the historical circumstances surrounding the martyrdom of Cyprian.

Ch. 3 retraces the history and scope of the ‘Great Persecution’ (303–313) through the literary record (principally Lactantius and Eusebius) and surviving *acta*, including several of recent discovery, from Africa, Egypt and Asia Minor, published only in the 1990s and so absent from the standard collections. This introduction of new material to the canon of authentic martyrs makes up for Barnes’ exclusion of both Maximilian and Marcellus, whose executions (in 295 and 298 respectively) arose from their pacifist refusal to serve in the army, and not—it is argued here—from their profession of Christianity.

Ch. 4 focuses on the beginnings of literary and ‘fictitious’ hagiography in the wake of the end of persecution (Donatist martyrs are briefly mentioned, but nothing is said of the Christian victims of Julian’s apostate regime). The bulk of the chapter is devoted to the *Life of Antony*, and to Jerome’s three monastic *Lives*. Barnes’ treatment of the former is couched entirely in the context of recent scholarly controversy over the nature of the text and its authorship, reinforcing the case for a pre-existing source which Athanasius transcribed and edited. Of Jerome’s works, Barnes offers copious résumés of the contents to demonstrate the differences between them: the ‘so-called’ *Life of Malchus* is shown not to belong to the biographical genre at all; the *Lives* of Paul and Hilarion shared an intention on the part of Jerome to outdo the *Life of Antony*, the former solely in the realms of fiction, the latter an account of a known historical figure embellished by literary invention and romance. The other principal product of late fourth century hagiography, Sulpicius Severus’ *Life of St Martin*, is reserved for sceptical treatment in a separate chapter: in ch. 5 Barnes marshals Sulpicius’ chronological contradictions and re-working of motifs from classical writers to expose the ‘fraudulence’ of its claims to historical veracity, placing it in ‘the same intellectual milieu’ (p. 224) as the *Historia Augusta*.

Ch. 6 sets as its aim ‘illustrating the problems of analysis and interpretation’ (p. 241) of a selection of fifth and sixth century texts. Short sections devoted to the monk Isaac, the *Life of Hypatios*, Melania the Younger, Germanus of Auxerre, Severinus of Noricum, and the stylites Symeon and Daniel, in fact serve as *prolegomena* to much more extended discussion of

Mark the Deacon's *Life of Porphyry of Gaza*. After rehearsing the recent history of scholarly effort devoted to this problematical text, Barnes takes particular aim at Frank Trombley's attempt to reclaim its authenticity as a contemporary source for the early fifth century, 'outflanking' (p. 282) this case for the defence with a detailed demonstration of the discrepancies, anachronisms and inventions which locate the *Life of Porphyry* in the age of Justinian.

Ch. 7 offers a brief survey of 'modern' critical hagiography from the sixteenth to the twentieth century (largely the work of the Bollandists), followed by further miscellaneous examples of the contribution which prosopographical methods of Roman imperial history can bring to the critical study of hagiographical texts, nomenclature often providing clues to sources and dates, and exposing fiction and invention. In the closing pages the chronological discipline is relaxed to range from saints Alban and George to Evelyn Waugh's *Helena*, a 'saint' Napoleon (a respelling of a supposed Alexandrian martyr Neopolis), and a pair of alleged seventeenth-century Scottish martyrs lauded by Macaulay.

Of the nine appendices, three (1, 8 and 9) return to St Peter in Rome: the supporting evidence (owed to E. Champlin) for the conclusion that he met his death not by crucifixion, but by being burnt alive (hence leaving no remains to be recovered?); and a fascinating exposé of circumstances surrounding the discovery of his alleged bones beneath St Peter's Basilica in 1941. Appendix 3 usefully tabulates Barnes' own list of authentic martyr documents from Polycarp to the Great Persecution alongside those of other standard modern collections.

Readers will recognize here all the hallmarks of Barnes' unrivalled contribution to early Christian studies over the past generation: the pursuit of rigorous scholarly accuracy founded in the meticulous handling of texts, and in the precise detail of chronology and prosopography. The logic of the method is unassailable, and the facts once established leave no room for doubt. Few others, if any, among modern scholars, especially in comparison with past giants like Lightfoot or Delehaye, meet the exacting standards required: Frend, to take one example, was guilty of 'congenital inaccuracy in detail' (p. 152); while the (admittedly widely recognized) failings of Musurillo's still current edition of the martyr-acts are fully exposed (pp. 352-3).

The result of Barnes' unerring eye for accuracy is rather less of the generic 'description' of the development of Christian hagiography promised in the preface than a series of notes and studies on particular points of detail, linked by a summary narrative: essential foundations of fact are laid, but at the expense of any broader social and cultural understanding of the growth of hagiography in its late Roman context (what of its relation to liturgy and the 'cult of the saints', for example?). Moreover, one suspects that the real world had more shades of grey than the black-and-white conclusions of

these studies will allow. Barnes asserts categorically that from AD 260 Gallienus made Christianity a 'lawful religion' (p. 97), and that there is no evidence of Christian civilians being executed for their beliefs in the last four decades of the third century (p. 106). So far the bald facts of the case: but this is to say nothing, for example, of what being 'lawful' might actually mean in the third-century Roman empire, or of the degree of impact, if any, of the emperor's pronouncements for his Christian subjects in this or that province.

One of the aims of Barnes' analysis is to impugn for the unwary the historical validity of some key hagiographical texts, and expose the extent of literary invention at work. But questions may still remain about his conclusions on the degree of reliance to be placed on such texts. Why should it be, for example, that the *Life of Germanus of Auxerre*, despite chronological difficulties and fanciful episodes (the 'alleluia victory'?), still commands respect (p. 256, 'the fact that Constantius knew nothing about Britain c. 430 *need not cast doubt on what he says* [my italics] about Germanus' activities in Auxerre and his final journey to Ravenna'), whereas in the face of the unworkable chronology for its hero's career in the *Life of Martin*, 'it therefore requires explicit and positive arguments to show that the rest of the *Life* is not equally fraudulent' (p. 233). Establishing degrees of fraudulence is not, it appears, such an exact (or consistent?) science.

That said, every historian of early Christian saints and martyrs will need this volume to hand as an indispensable repository of the factual record, and a model of accurate scholarship. Sad to report that its typography is (as Barnes himself might say of more substantive faults in others) 'riddled with minor errors': my favourite was 'Religion sin ...' (p. 238, n. 12); and Cyprian's martyrdom is wrongly dated on p. 82.

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