

REVIEW

VIOLENCE AND THE EMPERORS IN LACTANTIUS

Gianna Zipp, *Gewalt in Laktanz' 'De mortibus persecutorum'*. Millennium-Studien/ Millennium Studies, 95. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021. Pp. xv + 298. Hardback, €113.95. ISBN 978-3-11-074066-0.

Lactantius, professor of Latin rhetoric in the court of Diocletian, future teacher of Constantine's ill-fated son Crispus, and, with Eusebius, the most important apologist to challenge the Tetrarchs' persecution of Christians, has been praised for his high-Ciceronian style since Jerome (*Ep.* 58.10). His works have tended, however, to be the province either of Classicists interested in his vast philological learning or of historians seeking insight into the Tetrarchy, on whose failings he is ferocious, and the reigns of Constantine and Licinius, to whose brief years of apparently untroubled cooperation his treatise *De mortibus persecutorum* is a rare witness. In this book, Gianna Zipp offers a detailed literary study of the dominant theme in this notoriously biting pamphlet: the violence practised, and eventually suffered, by the persecuting emperors.

Zipp's work, like Lactantius', is very much a monograph, rarely straying, except in the occasional footnote, from its main theme, though Zipp clearly is versed in the wider Lactantian scholarship and in his seven-volume apology, *Divinae institutiones* (written in 305–11 and partially updated for the Constantinian era in 324–5; henceforth, *Diu. inst.*). Zipp divides her study into seven parts. The first briefly justifies her subject, pointing to the centrality of *De mortibus persecutorum* (henceforth, *Mort.*) as a source for the final empire-wide persecution, and explains that she intends to conduct a 'Close Reading' of the text. The term and method are explained for her Germanophone readership. She continues with a summary of *Mort.*, a detailed survey of scholarship, and a discussion of its positioning among various genres. It is, she concludes, chiefly a history (of sorts) with elements of the epistle—and of course of protreptic, if not of outward-facing, defensive apologetic.

Three lengthy chapters follow. Each is divided by persecuting emperor, in order of accession: Diocletian, Maximian (generally the briefest), Galerius

(generally the longest), and Maximinus Daia.¹ As Zipp explains in the introduction, the persecuting emperors from Nero onward listed at the outset of the work get far less play than these four; the same is true for Maxentius, despite Lactantius' brief disparagement at *Mort.* 18.9. Together with Constantius Chlorus, Constantine, and Licinius, they appear here and there in the discussion, but Zipp remains focused on the four villainous protagonists. Chapter 2 concerns their characterisation as tyrants. They are cut from the same cloth—injustice, fearfulness, greed, self-centredness, etc.—but by no means with the same stamp. Thus, Diocletian is especially fearful, Galerius barbarous, arrogant, and bestial, Maximian and Daia (also *semibarbarus*) given over to lust, and so on.

Zipp's task is aided by Lactantius' own provision of character-sketches for the four original Tetrarchs (*Mort.* 7–9, including Constantius in passing at 8.7), but she ranges more widely. This means that her discussion frequently overlaps with her account, in Chapter 3, of the violence perpetrated by the Tetrarchs. For example, we learn twice about Roman sexual *mores* and the *lex Scatinia*, in very similar language (76, 144). In one case, the repetition is felicitous: on 113, Zipp had misread Lactantius as implying (*Mort.* 39.1, *ne ab Augusta quidem, quam nuper appellauerat matrem, potuit temperare*) that Daia made an advance at his own mother. In fact, as Zipp correctly states on 174, the Augusta Valeria, Diocletian's daughter, was the wife of Galerius, Daia's father according to the titlature Galerius had adopted (*Mort.* 32.5). It would have made the book more efficient to condense this material: a ruler's character cannot be divided from his actions. Perhaps, however, there was for that reason no way to do so without combining the two chapters into one very long one; and much can be said for distilling Lactantius' conception of tyranny at the outset.

Chapter 4 discusses, in great detail, a subject that clearly pleased Lactantius: the bitter deaths of the Tetrarchs. Again, Zipp shows very clearly the individuality of each man's demise. Diocletian, the fearful, increasingly ineffectual emperor, dies an old man tossing in bed and refusing to eat out of sheer depression at the destruction of his images, alongside Maximian's, by Constantine. Maximian hangs himself in a scene that quotes from Vergil's description of the dead Dido and the suicide of Amata (*Mort.* 30.5; *Aen.* 6.471, 12.603); the rapist of well-born men and girls has, in death, become womanish. Galerius, of course, gets the most disgusting end, a slow-spreading infection (Lactantius calls it *cancer*) in his genitals. Again Vergil appears, this time to

¹ Called thus, in keeping with the manuscript of *Mort.*, the often-corrupt Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 2627 (*olim* Colbertinus 1297), of the eleventh century. Zipp cites C. S. Mackay, 'Lactantius and the Succession to Diocletian', *CPh* 94 (1999) 198–209, but does not remark on his demonstration that 'Daza' is more likely to have been the original name of the emperor who called himself Galerius Valerius Maximinus, nor does she use that spelling. I will follow suit.

characterise Galerius, the bestial opponent of Christians, as a beast in death. Maximinus Daia, finally, gobbles down food and wine and goes mad, bashing his head until his eyes fall out; Zipp, rather less convincingly, sees an inversion of the philosophical deaths of Socrates and Seneca by poison.

Chapter 5 runs back through the material again, focusing especially on the accounts of the pre-Tetrarchic emperors, to establish, rightly, that Lactantius makes God the instigator, whoever the immediate executioner may be, of the merited death of each persecuting emperor. The sixth part reflects, for about two pages, on 'collective memory theory' and its relevance for *Mort.*; this excursus belonged, surely, in the introductory discussion of genre. The seventh sums up the results in detail. A lengthy bibliography follows, then an exiguous index that lacks, *inter alia*, entries for the Tetrarchs themselves. The defect is only partially ameliorated by a detailed table of contents, and an *index locorum* or nested topical index would have been a help. That said, the book is available open-access from De Gruyter, and so one can search both for German terms and for phrases from Lactantius' Latin, copiously cited with German translation, directly in the PDF.²

As a study aimed primarily at the small cohort of specialists in Lactantius, Zipp's monograph does its work reasonably well. Anyone who wants to discuss that author's characterisation of the Tetrarchs will be helped by what she has gleaned. Originating as a German doctoral thesis—written, as it happens, in the Protestant theology faculty at Mainz—the monograph, like many in that genre, aims rather at depth than breadth; the writing is clear and uses jargon sparingly, but Zipp has trusted in the inherent interest of Lactantius' work to justify her contribution. A wider non-Lactantian framing might have drawn more non-specialists in. For example, engagement with Peter Van Nuffelen's analysis of Orosius' *Historiae aduersum paganos* would have set Lactantius' vehemence and broadly apologetic aims alongside those of an author in many ways similar.³ No good is done, however, by complaining that a book does not do what it has not set out to do, and the introductory synopsis and literature review will help to orientate those less interested in Lactantius for his own sake than in, for example, comparison of his characterisation of emperors with that

² One peculiarity deserves parenthetical mention. English-speaking readers accustomed to consulting J. L. Creed, *Lactantius: De mortibus persecutorum* (Oxford Early Christian Texts; Oxford, 1984) should not be confused by a citation style that leads Zipp to list and regularly to cite it as if it had in fact been produced in 1897, with the text of Samuel Brandt and Georg Laubmann, *L. Caelii Firmiani Lactanti opera omnia*, part 2, fascicle 2 (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 27.2; Prague, Vienna, and Leipzig). In fact, though Creed's apparatus is economical, his is a distinct edition resting on examination of the manuscript: Creed, op. cit. xlvii–vii.

³ P. Van Nuffelen, *Orosius and the Rhetoric of History* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford, 2012).

of other authors'. Scholars working on such topics will do well to read Zipp's analysis.

That said, Zipp has set for herself a goal that I am not certain her study attains. She will discuss *topoi*, 'Prätexpte'—a wide-ranging term; 'intertexts' will approximate—'zeitgenössischem Gedankengut', and the work's theology, all to enable deeper historical study (2). The aim is a good one. Lactantius was a man at the edge of serious affairs, appointed to teach the men who would administer Diocletian's new empire. Despite his ferocity, or perhaps not to blunt its edge, he avoids some obvious opportunities for flattering the Tetrarchs' conquerors. While no one can read about Maximian's killing of a *uilis eunuchus* left as a decoy in Constantine's place and be entirely untroubled by the disconnect from Lactantius' Christian ethics (cf. 147 n. 84; *Mort.* 30.3), Lactantius offers only passing praise for Constantius and blame for Maxentius—precisely, in fact, what enables Zipp nearly to omit them. More than mere propaganda, *Mort.* is a kind of anti-propaganda, a dark portrait of emperors whose panegyrists had painted them bright. Zipp's third element, the contemporary thought-world, is therefore what matters first, and it is blurry here. Her readings are most successful when they stand demonstrably close to Lactantius' own thinking. Take the persecutors' deaths. The allusion to Vergil's Amata, the animalian allusions woven into the death of the bestial Galerius (or, for that matter, the nod to the death of Antiochus in 2 *Macc.* 9.9), the 'Angst' and 'Passivität' of the dying Diocletian (191, 193), are all really there. Zipp has got at major themes in Lactantius' account. I am less convinced that Diocletian's death *aestuante anima* (*Mort.* 42.2) alludes to his earlier predilection for fiery torture; still less, that the image of a man tossing on his bed alludes to the metaphor of the shipwreck of state (189–90).

Lucretius, who spoke of the happiness of the one who sees a ship being wrecked and knows he is not in it (189; *Lucr.* 2.1–4), is a favourite Lactantian author, and Lactantius does revel in Diocletian's demise. Perhaps the shipwreck-*topos* is not intended, but Lucretius' scenario is at least analogous to Lactantius'. By contrast, to stress the link between Diocletianus *Iovius* and Jupiter ('von außerordentlicher Bedeutung für das Verständnis der Rolle Diokletians in *De mortibus persecutorum*': 67) or to suggest that Lactantius was putting the fire in Galerius' palace, allegedly laid by the emperor himself, in parallel with Nero's fire of Rome (150–1; cf. 127–8) misses features of *Mort.* that would have given the analysis precision. Lactantius does not draw on Suetonius or Tacitus in *Diu. inst.*, and his Nero is, remarkably, a persecutor without the famous fire (*Mort.* 2.6–9). He does not stress the connection between the Tetrarchs and Jupiter and Hercules; the titles *Iouii* and *Herculii* are mentioned only at *Mort.* 52.3, except to distinguish Maximianus Herculus ('our' Maximian) from the Maximianus we call Galerius. In this neglect, *Mort.* stands parallel to many official texts, but not to the panegyrics of which it is an

inversion.⁴ This most immediate set of intertexts is entirely missing; indeed, the *Panegyrici Latini* do not even appear in the bibliography.

There is nothing wrong with Zipp's choice to focus on Lactantius' rhetoric without assessing his accuracy.⁵ But Lactantius is writing something at least akin to history, and so this kind of literary study needs to be rooted in a sharp sense of the work's historical setting, if it is going to elucidate its literary aims. General *topoi* ramify too easily if they are not controlled by Lactantius' own reading (copiously documented in *Diu. inst.*) and the approximate *Sitz im Leben* our data allow. For example, do Galerius' gory surgeries (*Mort.* 33.1–4), described by a man who had composed a treatise on the human body (*De opificio dei*), really allude to the flaying of Ovid's Marsyas (206–7)? To be confident in this kind of close reading, we need to know, as well as we can, when Lactantius was writing, for whom, and how he might have expected them to interpret what he had written. Zipp sidesteps chronology, averring that dates between 313 and 320 are possible (11) and leaving it for historians to reconsider 'im Anschluss an diese Arbeit'. The extraordinary fact that Lactantius is both pro-Constantinian and pro-Licinian is therefore not given the room it deserves. Zipp suggests, while discussing the work's similarities to the epistolary form, that the addressee, a confessor named Donatus, might be fictive (26–7; cf. 37 n. 205, 'des—möglicherweise fiktiven—Adressaten Donatus'). Might it not, she wonders, be more important for literary analysis to think about his general characterisation as faithful confessor—and could he perhaps be inspired by the Donatus to whom Cyprian, a key theological authority for Lactantius, wrote his *Ad Donatum* (27 n. 158)? In fact, Donatus is a common North African name,⁶ and there is no more reason to think of a connection with Cyprian's Donatus than between Demetrianus, addressee of *De opificio dei*, and the hostile enquirer to whom Cyprian addressed *Ad Demetrianum*.

The coincidences of name suggest something vital: that Lactantius is writing for a colleague, perhaps one of his own former students, plausibly a fellow North African, who had survived torture for their shared faith. In an imperial order that is now, for the first time, overtly pro-Christian, *Mort.* is meant both to celebrate God's victory before such men and, with all Lactantius' rhetorical cunning, to make the depravity, folly, and ignominy of the dead Tetrarchs reverberate through their minds. Zipp's book will help modern readers to hear many of the echoes; important notes, however, have

⁴ Cf. R. Rees, 'The Emperors' New Names: Diocletian Jovius and Maximian Herculeus', in L. Rawlings and H. Bowden, edd., *Herakles and Hercules: Exploring a Graeco-Roman Divinity* (Swansea, 2005) 223–39.

⁵ The question does crop up occasionally, as at 214 n. 112, 216 n. 121, on the historicity of Galerius' death by worms.

⁶ Ninety instances in A. Mandouze, ed., *Prosopographie chrétienne du Bas-Empire, I: Prosopographie de l'Afrique chrétienne* (Paris, 1982) 289–328.

been drowned out. She is nonetheless right to stress the centrality of God for Lactantius' thinking. That fact, sometimes obscured in modern scholarship, matters more than any of the details on which one may express doubt or disagreement—or so one can be quite sure that the man himself would have agreed.⁷

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⁷ This review was written while the reviewer was a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow.