

## REVIEW

PHILOLOGY AND MARTYRDOM:  
A NEW EDITION OF  
*MARTYRIUM POLYCARPI AND MARTYRIUM PIONII*

Otto Zwierlein, *Die Urfassungen der Martyria Polycarpi et Pionii und das Corpus Polycarpianum. Band 1: Editiones criticae. Band 2: Textgeschichte und Rekonstruktion. Polykarp, Ignatius und der Redaktor Ps.-Pionius. Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte 116.1–116.2.* Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014. Pp. xx + 194; xii + 425. Hardback, €149.95. ISBN 978-3-11-037100-0.

It takes a brave soul to dig for the original version of a martyr text composed in the mid-second century AD and adapted constantly throughout the centuries to fit different political and theological needs. The account of the trial and execution at Smyrna of the Christian bishop Polycarp, first committed to writing in a letter from members of his congregation, became immediately popular as a model of correct behaviour in the face of persecution. It consequently suffered greatly at the hands of unscrupulous ancient editors, causing much scholarly debate about its many intractable problems. To restore the text to its pristine form, therefore, it is not enough to be courageous: a clearly defined sense of what is being looked for is also indispensable, and this is possible only with a thorough knowledge of the text's transmission and the periods through which it was transmitted—not only their complex intellectual history, but a wide range of literatures, languages, and cultures. Otto Zwierlein's two-volume edition of the *Martyrium Polycarpi* (*MPol*) and the third-century *Martyrium Pionii* (*MPion*), with extensive discussion of texts and contexts, leaves no doubt that he is one of a very small number of scholars equal to the challenge. The consequences for the discipline are likely to be momentous, not least because the *MPol* and the *MPion* have long been recognised as providing a unique body of evidence for the social history and the provincial administration of Smyrna under the Roman Empire,<sup>1</sup> in addition to their significance for the theological and cultural development of the Church. Following Zwierlein's edition much of this evidence needs to be reconsidered.

The preface of the work acknowledges the support and collaboration of many other experts. Among these, the contributions of Daniel Kölligan must be singled out: his transcription, transliteration, and translation into German

<sup>1</sup> See especially L. Robert, *Le Martyre de Pionios, prêtre de Smyrne*, G. Bowersock and C. P. Jones, edd. (Washington, D.C., 1994).

of the Old Armenian versions of both the *MPol* and the *MPion*, whose understanding is crucial for Zwierlein's editions, and his translation of the Greek *Urfassungen* of these texts into English, are in fact credited on the cover leaf of volume I. This first volume is mainly dedicated to the editions themselves. Besides those already mentioned, a conspectus of the main versions of both *Martyria* accompanied by an apparatus criticus contains the arguments underlying the new edition in technical form. The end of the volume has a bonus track: an edition of a late antique Latin translation of the *MPion*, together with a discussion of its date and provenance. On the basis of its intertextuality this version is dated to the fifth century, and the anonymous redactor located in the intellectual milieu of Southern Gaul.

The second volume contains what in other, less ambitious, editions might form the introduction. The order of topics appears eccentric at first glance: foregrounded is not the text of the *Martyria* (for which the *editiones criticae* of volume I do much of the work), but an account of the many historical and interpretive problems caused by the text of the *MPol* as traditionally printed. When the textual discussion starts in earnest, the order of *MPol* and *MPion* is reversed compared to volume I, to start with the latter—on the grounds that its textual history is less complex and is thus better suited to illustrating the value of the Old Armenian branch of the transmission. Although contamination of the texts is shown to have taken place from an early stage, a key figure in the distortion of the tradition is the dastardly pseudo-Pionius, who not only fraudulently adopted a martyr's name but composed an entire dossier of texts around his<sup>2</sup> rewritings of the *Martyria* around AD 400. A full portrait of this personage and his interactions with other interpolators builds up over the whole of the volume. The concluding sections E and F expand the focus to include the similarly ingenious forger of a corpus of letters attributed to Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius' fictional existence turns out to have sprung from the reference to a martyr Ignatius of Smyrna mentioned in an authentic passage of a letter from Polycarp himself to the inhabitants of Philippi. These last sections vividly illustrate the tendency of interpolations to spread and proliferate.

But to return to the central texts: the original letter version of the *MPol* was composed not long after Polycarp's martyrdom took place. A version is incorporated in Eusebius' *History of the Church*, but separate manuscript traditions and translations are also extant. The vast majority of extant versions offer not a plain and straightforward narrative of Polycarp's capture, trial, and death but a text with many interpretive and moralising narratorial comments and auxiliary episodes. In a recent formal analysis and commentary, Gerd Buschmann has argued that these exegetical and didactic elements articulate the

<sup>2</sup> I use the masculine pronoun of this person in accordance with the masculine pseudonym; but it is not impossible that a woman might have assumed the name.

primary purpose of the text: the narrative is there to illustrate a message.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars have long held that this material, or much of it, is secondary to the narrative, and that the original is much closer to the version as transmitted in a little-discussed Old Armenian manuscript; and this is the side which Zwierlein takes with panache. By producing a complex stemma, he is able to back up long-held misgivings about the gratuitous, anachronistic, and often inconsistent nature of these elements with a much firmer philological argument. The transmission of the later *MPion*, which presents itself as closely related to the *MPol* (the action starts on the anniversary of Polycarp's death), is treated as a less complicated test case for Zwierlein's method as it shows some of the same corruptions, but on a smaller scale. There is nothing in the detailed arguments which strikes me as misconceived or illogical; a rigorous testing of each point will no doubt be undertaken by critics who are less sympathetic to the author's initial assumptions.

As for the content of the crucial Old Armenian text, its concise version of the *MPol* represents, as a translation of a Syriac intermediary, that of the first edition of Eusebius' *History of the Church*, composed before AD 296, that is, predating the Diocletianic persecution. It is well known, thanks to the work of T. D. Barnes among others, that Eusebius edited and rewrote his *History* three or four times to respond to this persecution and to the subsequent rule of Constantine;<sup>4</sup> in consequence, the precise content of the earliest form is all but inaccessible to us. In his later versions of the *History* Eusebius turned to a new, interpolated version of the *MPol* which had been produced in the interim. Zwierlein's textual account of the process involved is credible; but I would welcome further thoughts on why Eusebius would have felt the need to change his work in accordance with an account which, presumably, he knew to be a more recent rewriting. A case in point is the analysis of Eusebius' attempts to rescue the improbable story of Polycarp's vision of the burning pillow—foreshadowing, with doubtful exactitude, the manner of his death<sup>5</sup>—which had been inserted into a new edition of the *MPol*. This episode is absent from the Old Armenian text; and Zwierlein shows in detail that Eusebius realised that the story of the later version made poor sense, as can be seen from his changes

<sup>3</sup> G. Buschmann, *Martyrium Polycarpi—eine formkritische Studie. Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der Entstehung der Gattung Märtyrerakte*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche (Berlin and New York, 1994); id., *Das Martyrium des Polycarp übersetzt und erklärt* (Göttingen, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> T. D. Barnes, 'The Editions of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*', *GRBS* 21 (1980): 191–201; id., *Early Christian Historiography and Roman History* (Tübingen, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Polycarp is sentenced to be burned alive; but the flames miraculously fail to kill him, and when he is subsequently stabbed to death, the prodigious amount of blood exiting the wound extinguishes the fire.

to the wording. Why did he adopt it then, instead of sticking with his better version which lacked the scene entirely?

At a later stage, the textual transmission encounters pseudo-Pionius, one of the more ambitious forgers in the text's history. His *magnum opus* has been reconstructed as a compilation of material found in collections of martyrdoms, that is, the *MPol* and the *MPion*, with his originally-composed *Vita Polycarpi auctore Pionio*, including also the (authentic but interpolated) letter of Polycarp to the Philippians, perhaps a spurious letter of 'Ignatius' addressed to Polycarp, a list of Smyrna's earliest bishops, and a report on Polycarp's biblical exegesis (the two last items may have been incorporated into the *Vita Polycarpi*). On the basis of the use of other authors in the extant part of the corpus, as well as citations of the texts elsewhere, Zwierlein dates the compilation to c. AD 400. The compiler assumes the name of the martyr Pionius in an epilogue added to the *MPol* which gives the supposed signatures of each transcriber of the text, where he also refers to his edition of a larger body of Polycarp-related writings. He does not seem to worry much about the fact that the supposed redactor's own martyrdom is included in the collection, while also showing clear signs of being redacted by the same compiler 'Pionius'. His redactions seek to harmonise the whole blend, both fictive and authentic, through judicious adaptations throughout, but with little regard to any notion of historical veracity. The evident success of his scheme, as his versions become the ancestors of almost all later transcriptions, tells us much about Christians' appetite for (more or less) coherent, expansive, and expandable narratives about their past heroes.

Indeed, Zwierlein's study is particularly valuable for showcasing the various insidious methods employed by skilful interpolators and for teaching us to spot them. For example, they may plant a key word in one part of a text in order to take it up again in an interpolated passage in another place. To a casual reader, this cross-reference may appear to guarantee the authenticity of the interpolated passage. The aforementioned pseudo-Pionius is a master in these arts. A characteristic trick of his is to conclude inserted passages by means of a connecting particle ('and', 'but'), the better to conceal the seams in the patchwork.

There is a pronounced aesthetic difference between the pared-down, narrative-driven texts of Zwierlein's *Urfassungen*, especially the *MPol*, in which the interpretation of events is almost exclusively focalised through the crowd of spectators, and their unwieldy descendants with their narratorial comments, extended preaching, and insertions of visions and supplementary scenes. An analysis of the types of additions which entered at each stage in the transmission provides a sense of the imaginative desires which caused them to be added. One particularly rich example is the added backstory of the martyr Sabina in the *MPion*: later editions provide her with an earlier existence under the name 'Theodote', in which she was the slave of a brutal mistress Politte. The same version has her evil persecutor threaten her with the brothel if she

does not renounce her Christian faith. Such accretions appear to be inspired by a romantic mindset of the kind which found its most celebrated expression in the ancient novel.

At the same time, Zwierlein's stemmatic analysis helps to trace the development of theological and political thought in the church, especially in the context of new waves of official persecution, for example in the increasing condemnation of volunteering for martyrdom ('Montanism'). In fact, the purged versions restore to their proper place many items for which the *MPol* had been thought to contain the earliest evidence: the use of 'catholic' for the church as opposed to its 'heretical' rivals, the anti-semitism of Christians in Smyrna, the suggestive phrase 'great Sabbath', echoes of debates about the date of Easter, and the references to the Trinity can all be shown to belong to later interpolations. The same holds for names of Roman officials, which have caused many headaches for scholars seeking to date Polycarp's death. Zwierlein succeeds in tracing the origins of some of the interpolated names (many go back to pseudo-Pionius' unscrupulous pilfering of plausible-looking characters, for example from inscriptions and from Eusebius' *History* itself) and thus removes this obstacle to following Eusebius' assertion that Polycarp's martyrdom took place between 161 and 167, in the early years of the reign of Marcus Aurelius. In all of these instances, long-held scholarly doubts about the authenticity of these passages are confirmed by painstakingly detailed comparison and evaluation of manuscript readings in a wide range of translations.

Although the style is lucid and the argument well illustrated throughout, some effort is necessary to do justice to Zwierlein's work. There are many cross-references, and many detailed discussions of texts not printed in volume I (especially the letter of Polycarp to the Philippians and the spurious *Ignatiana*). Textual and stylistic arguments are presented in a fairly condensed way with complex mark-up of passages (using bold, spacing, single and double underlining, italics, and many types of brackets). The numbering of passages in the various texts is often challenging; more explicit guidance would certainly be welcomed by anyone who is not already an expert on these materials. In the discussion some passages are translated while others are not, which means that volume II is difficult to tackle for anyone with insufficient Greek in particular. A full appreciation requires, in addition, knowledge of Latin, English, French (a Slavic branch of the transmission is reported in French translation), and Old Armenian. The argument builds up in such a way that several facts which are stated early on are only proved a long way down, requiring patient reading and re-reading. In a work of this scale, such mistakes as arise from a lapse of concentration are remarkably few in number: a rare example is the use of *apelthein* in the apparatus on p. 114 in vol. I to refer to *katelthein* in the text as printed.

In sum, the importance of the findings and the subtlety and clarity of the thoughts presented is such that the reader's patience will inevitably be rewarded. True to his habit, Zwierlein demonstrates a fabulously wide range of knowledge of both the classical and the late antique world which allows him to pick up literary and cultural references as well as linguistic oddities. He shows what the traditional craft of philology can achieve (and still needs to achieve, especially in the arena of late antique studies), and how much effort and erudition it takes to establish solid facts on firm ground. Above all, despite the arduous labour involved, Zwierlein's keen enthusiasm for his subject and his infectious delight at his discoveries shine through every page.

*University of Glasgow*

CHRISTA GRAY  
christa.gray@glasgow.ac.uk