

R. Greco: *Pagani e Cristiani a Siracusa tra il III e il IV secolo d. C.* (Supplementi a «Kokalos» 16). Pp. 145. Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 1999, pbk. ISBN: 88-7689-157-9.

Rosario Greco's study of the religious dynamics of third- and fourth-century Syracuse starts with a promise to approach the subject free from the Christianizing preconceptions that have often bedevilled such studies in the past (p. 7). His first chapter (on pagan cults in late antique Syracuse) begins in a style that holds true to this intention: a broadside against the use of the monolithic term 'paganism' and the author's preference for an emphasis on plural 'pagan religions' (p. 13). He is similarly scathing of any credence given to legends of the apostolic foundation of Christianity at Syracuse (p. 53 and n. 10). Some readers might see the need to make such points as rather quaint. But pious, Christianizing whimsy (memorably characterized as 'maudlin flapdoodle' by E. A. Thompson in *Who Was St Patrick?* [Woodbridge, 1985], 165) can be remarkably tenacious: thus G.'s polemical declarations are worth making.

Nevertheless, there is no escaping the fact that the sources are not always forthcoming on issues that G. would like to discuss. Roger Wilson noted that the evidence for religious activity in Sicily under the principate is problematic, especially in terms of dating, 'which make[s] even an outline account hazardous' (*Sicily under the Roman Empire* [Warminster, 1990], 277). For the late Republic, we have Cicero's description of Syracuse's religious sites in the fourth *Verrine*; thereafter the picture becomes hazier. Hence G.'s treatment of 'traditional polytheism' (pp. 14-26) relies heavily on literary sources that are mostly earlier than the third century. He is on more secure ground when it comes to discussing 'mystery cults': it is generally agreed, for instance, that the Syracuse *mithraeum* dates to the third century (pp. 29-30), and that various lamps depicting Isis and Serapis

belong to the third and fourth centuries (p. 41). Yet even when he resorts to archaeology and epigraphy, G. is sometimes compelled to use earlier evidence, such as the first/second century AD epitaphs of priests of Egyptian cults (pp. 37-9). The resulting picture of paganism at Syracuse provides a less complete portrait of their dynamism in late antiquity than G. might have wished.

G. argues that Christianity arrived late at Syracuse (pp. 51-62), and in this respect he takes his lead from scholars (notably Giorgio Otranto) who have studied the dissemination of Christianity in southern Italy. He reminds us that when Paul put in at Syracuse on his way to Rome, he found no brethren there as he did at Puteoli or in the imperial capital. The earliest explicit evidence for Christians at Syracuse is the presence of the city's bishop Chrestus at the Council of Arles in 314. Syracusan bishops participated at other fourth century councils, but they were bit part players compared to the episcopate in other parts of the Empire. G. seeks to emphasise that early Christianity at Syracuse was essentially pluralist. Yet much of the evidence he uses to support this case — including astonishing inscriptions containing invocations of pagan gods, Christ, and various angels — is drawn from elsewhere in south-eastern Sicily rather than Syracuse itself (pp. 64-76). Doubtless the situation at Syracuse *was* similar: but the surviving evidence means that G. is unable to demonstrate what it was like precisely. Rather more fruitful is G.'s discussion (in ch. 3) of evidence such as lamps, epitaphs, and amulets from various Syracusan necropoleis that appear to show a fusion between pagan and Christian practices. G. writes of a 'pagan-Christian symbiosis' at Syracuse that defies assumptions of Christianity developing as a monolithic cult, untouched by the paganism surrounding it (pp. 116-23). There is much here that will support Ramsay MacMullen's contention that 'the triumph of the church was not one of obliteration [of paganism] but of widening embrace and assimilation' (*Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to*

*Eighth Centuries* [New Haven, 1997], 159). In this respect G.'s analyses might have gone further. He concludes by remarking that in the third and fourth centuries Syracuse was 'more than ever a sea port ... a place of arrival, respite, and departure, a centre of contacts and exchanges, where there lived people who, even while maintaining their own traditions, were capable of openness, tolerance, and integration' (p. 126). Perhaps if G. had devoted more attention to locating religious change in its broader social and cultural milieu, he could have achieved a compelling portrait that sought to explain, and not merely describe, the phenomena he delineates so carefully.

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