

T. D. BARNES, *EARLY CHRISTIAN HAGIOGRAPHY AND ROMAN HISTORY* (Tria Corda 5). Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010. Pp. xx + 437. ISBN 9783161502262. €29.00.

According to its author, the primary purpose of this book 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’ (xi). This perhaps overstates the coherence of these seven chapters, which are connected in fairly broad fashion by a range of questions arising from the growth and development of Christianity in the Roman Empire from the first to the sixth centuries A.D. At the same time, however, it understates the extent to which Timothy Barnes here sets out to be argumentative more than descriptive. In place of a single overall thesis, the book offers the meticulous demonstration of a method: essentially, the

application of the historian's technique of prosopography to the study of the lives and actions of martyrs and saints.

The book's origin in public lectures (delivered at the University of Jena in 2008) comes across very clearly in the first few chapters, as B. plays the showman for the delight of his audience. He first brings forward a variety of unresolved problems and finds solutions for them each in turn; these are then brought together at the end of each chapter, usually as the basis for a general claim. Ch. 1 is the most miscellaneous, ending as it does with a list of issues resolved which includes (among other things) the modes of death of the apostles Peter and Paul, the status of Peter's shrine on the Vatican hill, and the authorship of John's Gospel and the book of Revelation. Ch. 2 has a narrower focus, however, and makes good use of the close analysis of early martyr acts to propose that the Christian Church was more socially respectable by the start of third century A.D. than has generally been believed; and ch. 3 tends in the same direction, seeking to establish that official toleration of Christians in the Empire began in the reign of Gallienus, and that the measures later adopted by Licinius and Constantine were thus less innovative than they might otherwise appear.

The discussions are both interesting and plausible, although scholars will still find plenty to argue with. I remain unconvinced, for example, that the prophecy of Peter's death in the gospel of John, which has Peter being dressed before his death and with his arms outstretched, is sufficient to infer that, as part of Nero's persecution of A.D. 64, the apostle was crucified in a 'combustible tunic' (9). (For one thing, the stretching out of the arms here surely refers to the process of being dressed, not to the manner of death.) But the method is what matters, and this is what comes out most clearly in the remaining chapters, which begin with the end of large-scale persecution and, as a consequence, (to borrow the title of chapter four) 'the beginnings of fictitious hagiography'. The remainder of the book accordingly sets out to establish 'the date, value and reliability' (300) of various hagiographical texts, before a concluding chapter offers a brief history of critical hagiography and presents the case for its continued relevance.

The main result is, perhaps surprisingly, a distinctly pragmatic approach to the problems presented by individual hagiographies, and many of the conclusions drawn are likely to prove widely acceptable: that the *Life of Antony*, for example, may be assigned to Athanasius at least as editor or redactor if not as originator of the text, or that the portrait of post-Roman Britain in the fifth-century *Life of Germanus of Auxerre* is largely imaginary. Also convincing is the review of the historicity of the supposedly fifth-century *Life of Porphyry of Gaza*, which confirms that it contains 'a series of institutional anachronisms' (268) and that it is not (or preserves very little of) the contemporary eye-witness account that it claims to be. This case has been made before; what is significant here is that the unreliability of the *Life of Porphyry* is taken to be demonstrated not by the miracles, exaggerations and tendentious interpretations it shares with most other hagiographies, but above all by the chronological difficulties it presents. This, for B., is the fundamental principle of critical hagiography: that the reliability of a text is to be assessed on the basis of its accuracy in the details of dates, events and names.

The major test-case, given a chapter to itself, is the *Life of Martin of Tours* and its various supplementary materials (which, among other things, describe Martin's death and protest the veracity of the work as a whole). The author of this dodgy dossier, the Gallic aristocrat Sulpicius Severus, is plausibly shown to have contradicted himself regarding the year of Martin's birth, and also to have assigned his hero a military career which appears to render impossible the meeting he describes between Martin and Hilary of Poitiers. For B. this is enough to confirm that 'the *Life of Martin* is not the honest and authoritative memorial of the Bishop of Tours that it pretends to be' (232) and enough therefore to shift the burden of proof on to those who wish 'to show that the rest of the *Life* is not equally fraudulent' (233). But the *Life of Martin* seems to present a different case from the *Life of Porphyry*, which may be admitted to be a deliberate imposture. For all that Sulpicius plays fast and loose with the dates and details — and for all that he protests his honesty and authority — he is in the end who he claims to be, and the *Life of Martin* too is what it claims to be: a hagiography, not a history. It is not, for me, a forgery or a falsification in the same way as the *Historia Augusta*, to which B. tentatively compares it. Rather, like much of hagiography, it occupies an awkward middle ground between history and fiction: it is more like the modern realist (or historical) novel than the romantic fantasy of Jerome's *Life of Paul the First Hermit*.

To my mind, the nature of the texts we are dealing with is best captured in B.'s comment on another of Jerome's hagiographies: 'it would be rash to attempt to segregate fact from fiction in much of the *Life of Hilarion*: Jerome had a good written source ... but he enjoyed invention and

romance' (192). This is true of the vast majority of hagiography, in which history is laced with fiction the way a cake might be laced with alcohol: and the question becomes not how to separate the two, but at what point the mixture becomes too rich. Scholars must exercise their own judgement as to how far to trust these unreliable narrators; and these judgements must in the end be evaluative rather than definitive. That, I think, may explain the slightly moralizing tone which often creeps into our discussions of such texts: the language of authenticity and honesty, or of forgery and falsification (for which B. prefers the term *Falschung*). Our judgements, in the end, are not always strictly about texts, but are also about their authors: thus 'Mark the Deacon' is here shown to be an impostor, and Sulpicius Severus a liar, while Lactantius — despite his 'demonstrably false and fictitious' (117) account of the death of Maximian — can be considered basically honest.

Ultimately, then, our use of these texts depends not only on their reliability regarding the things we can check, but also on how far we feel able to trust them regarding the things that we can't. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that distinguishing true facts from false is an important step on the way to understanding our sources, and must surely underpin all the rest. B. performs this task outstandingly well, and goes so far as to provide in a valuable appendix his own canon of hagiographical texts which he regards as 'authentic and/or contemporary' (356). His book is thus not only a valuable discussion of the issues, but a crucial resource for all students of hagiography.

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