

BOOK REVIEW

Divine Men and Women in the History and Society of Late Hellenism. Edited by MARIA DZIELSKA AND KAMILA TWARDOWSKA. Kraków, Poland: Jagiellonian University Press, 2013. Pp. 168. Paper, \$42.00. ISBN 978-83-233-3679-2.

These essays on late antique holy men and women, especially the dynamic, elusive *theios aner*, honor Professor Maria Dzielska, scholarly pillar of the Seminarium Historiae Byzantinae, contributor of one essay, and co-editor of the collection. The volume, distributed by Columbia University Press, poses some issues. “Holy,” or “Godly,” or just “intensely spiritual” or “intellectual” better fits some of the biographees like the cynicizing Saloustios or the platonizing Hypatia.¹ Where does one plant the chronological parameters of “late Hellenism”? Granted that it might be later than I think (200–400 CE), or later than the generous editors of the *Late Antiquity. A Guide to the Postclassical World* (250–800 CE) posit,² one stumbles to find included the Italian Boethius (*d. ca.* 525) or the Persian mystic Sufi Farīd-al-Dīn ‘Attār Nīšāpūrī (*d. ca.* 1221). Furthermore, the report summarizing excavations of late antique Alexandrian lecture halls, where Dzielska thinks the murdered Hypatia (*d. ca.* 415) might have taught, seems ruled beyond relevance by the Polish excavators’ chronology of the site (sixth century, 110).

Polymnia Athanassiadi discusses the sociability of Iamblichus the teacher as protreptic correspondent promoting Platonic virtues and Stoic ethics. His imaginary Pythagoras embodies a philosophical, theosophical sophistic construct. It appealed especially to his Apamean student, Sopater, his favorite pupil (20). In an age of declining standards in education, Sopater’s efforts at Constantine’s court came to nothing; indeed, officials there executed him for his paedagogical efforts. The Emperor Julian, student of Iamblichus’ students, tried to instantiate Iamblichus’ humane ideals: charity, love of man and god (*ep.* 89b, 289b). His benignity, and that of his Prefect of the East Sallustius, also came to naught.

¹Cf. Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1983) or eadem, “Strategies of Representation in Collective Biographies,” in T. Hägg and Ph. Rousseau, edd., *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 2000) 209-54.

²G.W. Bowersock, P. Brown, and O. Grabar (Cambridge Mass. 1999).

Pierre Chuvin studies several related inscriptions, including a defaced, four-sided funerary marble from northwest Phrygia dedicated to an Epitynchanos, or “Initiated.” Chuvin offers Greek texts, translations of the prose and poetry, and color photographs honoring a high-ranking Phrygian. On one less damaged face appear Phoibos, a rider, probably advertising the legendary Acmon (eponym of Phrygian Acmonia), and Hecate, goddess of the dead and the initiated (35). This stone, dated to 313 (ἔτους τρή), the year Maximinus’ persecutions of the Christians ended and he committed suicide, seems to be a spouse’s “deceased private deification,” a god for the family. Parallel commemorations of astral immortality, “honored by the gods,” stood mostly in Phrygia. The arch-priestess Ispatale initiated the deceased and “freed many from evil torments” (34, 44), probably miracle cures from diseases, not Christian initiation (cf. Matth. 4:24). “Pagans” employ the same language as Christians (46) in a short “period of religious neutrality.”

Dimitar Dimitrov addresses Synesius’ conflict between philosophy and being a Christian bishop. This abstruse essay about Hypatia’s Cyreneian pupil poses problems for students not immersed in late fourth-century church history and ideology. Problems in printing the Greek and even decrypting its transliterations (e.g. “qeourgiva” or “tevcnh”) multiplied my difficulties. Synesius would rather have died many deaths in “his highly intellectualized religiosity” (59) than serve as bishop, an office for which he thought himself ill-equipped (*ep.* 96, 41, 11, 96).

Maria Dzielska writes humorously about Hypatia’s legend and its continuing inspiration for novelists, playwrights, websites, and poets. She more glumly reviews the vague and exiguous evidence for her local activities in Alexandria, her self-conception as philosopher or active political force, and her nasty death at the hands of a Christian lynch mob led or inspired by the Patriarch Cyril.³ Synesius cannot thank her enough for her guidance (“mother, sister, teacher, euergete”), but back in Cyrene he lost touch with her when she moved from the apolitical lecture hall to a bolder role in boisterous, local civic affairs. Having advised the sympathetic governor, Praefectus Augustalis Orestes, she incurred the hostility and false accusations of Cyril’s party. Going out in her “distinguished professorial toga” or cloak (70, labeled “*tribon*”), accused of magic, astrology, satanic influ-

³ “Once More on Hypatia’s Death”; cf. her *Hypatia of Alexandria* (Cambridge, Mass. 1995; rev. ed. Kraków 2006).

ence, and idolatry, the *kathegemon* (teacher) fell victim to a Christian assassination mob—a “purely political... murder”.

Agnieszka Kijewska asks whether Boethius was a “Divine Man or Christian Philosopher.” Why not both, given the wide latitude this collection suggests? Boethius was prodigiously versed in Platonic philosophy, Theoderic’s Gothic politics, and Christian theology. Thus, he incurred the usual charges of impiety and sorcery (*Cons.* 1.4). Kijewska argues against simply identifying the (unnamed) prisoner/narrator with the author of the (chilly) *Consolatio*.⁴ Both prisoner and “Dame Philosophy” represent sides of Boethius’ personality, but Christianity and the Bible are not part of the jail discussion. Boethius nevertheless was venerated as saint and martyr.

Krzysztof Kościelniak tackles Aṭṭār’s obscure life and ambitious thought. His poem, *Conference of Birds*, allegorizes the Sufi journey to enlightenment. The wise hoopoe has communicated with King Solomon, according to the Quran (Sura 27.20-9; contra, Lev. 11:13-19), and the community of birds searches for Simorgh (“a mysterious, phoenix-like bird,” 96). Thirty thousand birds set out, but only thirty (*si morgh*, a pun meaning “Thirty Birds”) successfully traverse seven valleys. When they reach the requisite seventh valley (Oblivion in God), no king appears. After a long fruitless wait, they lose their selves in the divine essence. They realize that they have met the savior and he is them (*si morgh*). The Persian poet shows familiarity with Neoplatonic concepts of the “divine essence of the soul,” the body (“a cage”), evil and beauty, “the dog of desire,” and the nature of god. Islamic philosophy’s roots in the works of Aristotle did not exclude Plato and Plotinus’ wisdom.

In Alexandria, Adam Łukaszewicz has continued an extended series of Polish excavations. He describes (with three photographs, no plan) a colonnaded complex with twenty-one (so far) lecture rooms (for about 25 persons and with seats of honor) and a small theater or auditorium for about 300 persons (103). Circus faction graffiti have been unearthed but “no traces of their activities in the classrooms” (107). The rooms served assumed paedagogical purposes from approximately 475 to 650 CE. He asks whether large “pagan” educational institutions were thinkable at this date. Although we know some local individuals (e.g.,

⁴Following J. Relihan’s ironic reading, *The Prisoner’s Philosophy: Life and Death in Boethius’ Consolation* (Notre Dame, Indiana 2001).

Hierocles and Damascius), would non-Christian organizations be permitted schools? More digging necessary.

Andrzej Iwo Szoka notes in his persuasive essay that Salustios, in Damascius' fragmentary late platonic *History of Philosophers*, was "kind of Cynical" (66 A-B: κυνικώτερον δὲ ἐφιλοσόφει, κυνίζων). This late fifth-century Syrian from Emesa, although not a professing Cynic, followed the Cynics' way of life: he spoke frankly, indeed insultingly; he led a wandering life; he preferred raw foods, and generally sought self-sufficiency beyond desires (*autarkeia* and *apatheia*). He practiced a punishing *askesis*. He discouraged youths from attending any philosophical schools (irritating Proclus, head of the Athens Academy). Szoka asks, why did someone like him gravitate to an "almost expired philosophy"? He hypothesizes that the ascetic Brahmins, then in contact with the eastern Mediterranean civilizations, influenced him more. If that is so, friends and enemies misconstrued Salustios as "Cynic-like" and a distant heir of Diogenes, when in fact he was devoted to a less dogmatic, self-denying life of contemplation and mystical quests.

Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler's analysis stands out first for her just concern (123–128) about troublingly ambiguous and polysemic terminology. *Theios* offers a "very generously bestowed epithet" in the late(r) Hellenic epoch. "Sacred is first... a social construction," and "holy" within it includes a smaller subset of "divine" beings on a different ontological level. For (ancient) Christians, Jesus provided the "divine" paradigm that "holy" persons/proto-saints strove to imitate. This essay demands first position (not alphabetical ninth) for disentangling vital issues that other writers have not addressed.

Most deserving of the title "Divine Woman" was Sosipatra, wife of Eustathios, whose biography appears in Eunapios of Sardis' collective biographies/hagiographies, a period genre (*VS* vi.7.5ff; see Cox [Miller] 2000). Eunapios bestows unique attention on Sosipatra—a woman otherwise unknown, although he conversed with many other famous, learned women. Special inborn "sacred" qualities trump learning (125), a merely intellectual assimilation to the divine. Sosipatra's fairy-tale *paideia* concerns two old men who bring special clothes, books, and initiatory implements to school her. Later, by herself she masters all philosophers, poets, etc. She marries, has children, and loses her husband. Having fulfilled her social family obligations, she founds a successful school of inspired philosophy. "She is afterwards everywhere, miraculously omniscient and omnipresent, her contemporaries believe, just like the gods." She provides the rôle model beyond Hypatia and other women intellectuals whom Porphyry, Iamblichus, Julian, Proclus, and Damascius knew. Tanaseanu-Döbler observes

that the Latin West has almost no *comparanda* in holy “pagan” women, because there was no parallel institutional infrastructure.

Kamilla Twardowska ponders a metrical inscription of Athenais Eudocia, Theodosius II’s wife. Her name superscribes an ecphrastic poem placed prominently in the restored (by her?) Roman baths at Hammat Gader near the Sea of Galilee (Occupied Territories; still a health spa). Crosses flank the sixteen verses on a marble paving block, a decoration that her husband had forbidden on pavements (427 CE; see *Cod. Just.* LVIII.1). Twardowska suggests that Theodosius might have issued the prohibition later than Eudocia’s stays at the spa (152), although the chronology seemingly refutes that hypothesis. The author speculates that the sixteen verses reflect the sixteen names, possibly of waterspouts, in the poem’s “four springs set into four tetrads.”

Edward Watts explains ingeniously the notoriously negative elements in Damascius’ descriptions (written between 515–526 CE) of his philosopher exemplar, Isidore. He is “a perfectly imperfect philosophical exemplar,” because no one man combines all the excellences that the paradigmatic philosopher needs. Marinus’ flawless paragon of Neoplatonism, Proclus (ca. 412–485 CE), was allegedly “happiest of all the race of men,” so Marinus had to downplay Proclus’ wretched life history in order to make his (difficult) case. Following a less constricting rhetoric than his teacher, Damascius’ “deceptively” balanced portrait-specified faults of figure, personality, learning, and instruction⁵ and introduces many other figures (including Hypatia). Thus he endorses Isidore’s career choices in an age dangerous for “pagan” intellectuals (166–167). His flaws, nevertheless, pale in comparison to his more significant virtues. Damascius was the last scholar when Theodosius closed the Athenian colleges in 529.

Agreement on explicit definitions and ideological assumptions could have integrated these papers better. Who or what was a “divine person” to pagan Hypatia in Alexandria or to Christian Boethius in Rome a century later? Would he fully acknowledge her choices? Non-Christian philosophers employed different criteria and rhetoric for this most elastic and elusive category. Does a wonder-craving audience place parameters on the *theios aner*’s Hellenism? Do “divine” philosophers change their nature with time, or does the dynamic genre shift their “lives from biography to hagiography”? Only Athanassiadi (13–14) and Ta-

⁵ See P. Athanassiadi’s text and translation (downloadable on the WWW): *Damascius. The Philosophical History* (Athens 2000) with a 54 pp. introduction.

naseanu-Döbler (125) acknowledge fully the slippery vagueness of the epithet *theios/theia*. That elasticity imports confusion into scholarly discourse. Because one reads that these scholars *venerate* Late Hellenism's "divine" representatives (7), the fact that some authors place "divine" in quotation marks (e.g. Dzielska, Tanaseanu-Döbler), and some do not (e.g. Kijewska, Szoka, Twardowska), has implications that transcend punctuation. Perhaps one concept's semantics shift seismically depending on its application to an urban philosopher or a religious desert-hermit.

The volume's eleven essays invite readers already versed in the intricate sociologies of the late-antique East's Hellenisms and their propagandists and intelligentsia, pagan and Christian. Current attention grows for the still somewhat neglected, although once celebrated "rock stars" of this dangerous age. These educated individuals, elevated by their peers for their learning, doctrinal subtlety, miracles, or peculiar life-styles to an extraordinary, superhuman status constituted "a social construction... contested in a polyphonic discourse" (Tanaseanu-Döbler 126). This volume contributes to that polyphony of ancient perceptions and modern methods grounded in Ludwig Bieler's seminal work⁶ and others more recent, some cited in footnotes. One also welcomes analysis of the holy—or holy-ish—famous or not persons, women (Hypatia, Sosipatra, Eudocia) and men, (Epitynchanos, Synesius, Boethius, Saloustios, Proclus, Isidore) who flourished in that eastern world full of wonders. The book illuminates charismatic "pagan" and "Christian" individuals perceived to embody superhuman moral and intellectual wisdom.⁷

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⁶ Θεῖος ἄνθρωπος: *Das Bild des "göttlichen Menschen" in Spätantik und Frühchristentum* (Vienna 1935-1936).

⁷ Many errors of spelling, syntax, idiom, and translation mar the English texts, but Anglophones should be grateful when scholars reared in other tongues publish research in English.