

BOOK REVIEW

Melania: Early Christianity Through the Life of One Family. Edited by C.M. CHIN and C.T. SCHROEDER. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. Pp. 328. Hardcover, \$95.00. ISBN 978-0-520-29208-6.

Melania is collection of essays loosely tied together by two Late Antique aristocratic Roman matrons of the same name. Hoping to live as Christian ascetics, both abandoned their considerable family wealth—or at least tried to. Melania the Elder was the paternal grandmother of her namesake, Melania the Younger. This book might be called a festschrift but shrinks from explicitly calling itself such. As the editors note late in its Introduction, “This book is in part tribute to the scholarship of Elizabeth A. Clark, who taught and mentored all the contributors either formally or informally” (8).

“In part” seems an understatement. The spirit of Clark’s scholarship permeates this volume’s pages, and in a salutary way that reflects just how significantly Clark’s scholarship and, as importantly, her devoted efforts at mentoring young scholars has shaped the field of Early Christian studies for more than a generation. This volume is the second festschrift-like homage to Clark. Whereas the first was put together by a collection of Clark’s colleagues and early doctoral students,¹ the essays here were written mostly by a more recent cadre of Clark’s students. Divided into six sections—each with two or three separately authored chapters, and each section with its own introduction—the volume probably has something to satisfy every reader’s taste. Here’s a sampling—one chapter from each section—that pleased mine.

In Part One (“Aristocracy”), Caroline Schroeder argues that unlike the *vitae* of early Christian women who are typed as repentant harlots, Geron-tius’ *Vita Melaniae Iunior* portrays its subject as one who, thanks in part to

¹ Martin, Dale B, and Patricia Cox Miller, eds. 2005. *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography*. Durham: Duke University Press.

her aristocratic origins, can at once cultivate dispassion while yet, almost paradoxically, having a broad range of emotions available to her. And not all of these emotions harmonized with the ancient stereotype of the highborn woman. As one capable of gender transgression yet also conforming in other ways to conventional feminine social roles, Gerontius' Melania, Schroeder speculates, likely attracted a broad fan base among late antique ascetic women, who saw in her a powerful combination of that with which they could identify and that to which they might aspire.

In Part Two ("Body and Family"), Kristi Upson-Saia resorts to a sometimes gory rehashing of how ancient medical practice understood and treated bodily wounds in order to show how early Christians used ancient concepts of physical wounding to figure, first, sin and heresy and later, in the time of the Melanias, the sort of contrition and repentance that Melania the Younger and other ascetics underwent when they were said to have been "wounded by divine love."

In a Part Three chapter, Rebecca Krawiec suggests that Melania the Elder might be usefully seen not through the category of gender, but through the noncategory of "queer," a designation that connotes not sexual orientation so much as the transgressive facility Melania exhibits in her interactions with men—a facility that allows her, for example, to teach a male figure how to control his own heterosexuality.

Following the example that Clark set for her students, Susanna Drake's chapter in Part Four, "Wisdom and Heresy", looks beyond an old dogmatists' tired questioning about who is orthodox and who heretical in Augustine's theological debate with Pelagius. Drake opts instead to examine how cultural factors, such as a decidedly aristocratic penchant to see an ascetic's noble origins as endowing her with amazing powers of self-fashioning, played a role in shaping Pelagius' ideal of the Christian who, by dint of long and stubborn effort, attains moral perfection. That ideal was incarnated not only in Pelagius' famous portrayal of the virgin Demetrias, but also in Gerontius' construction of Melania *junior* some forty years later.

Part Five, "In the Holy Places," features a chapter by Andrew Jacobs, who compares fifth-century ascetic aristocratic emigrés in the Eastern de-

serts to Gertrude Stein's "Lost Generation." He thereby shows how the latter's concern with themes of empire, exile, and elitism helps his readers understand, *mutatis mutandis*, the former's world-construction and self-fashioning.

Michael Penn's chapter in Part Six, "Modernities," follows Melania the Younger's afterlives as they emerged first in the early twentieth-century writings of Cardinal Rampolla, essayist/historian Georges Goyau, and Jesuit Herbert Thurston, and later in both Clark's English translation of Gerontius' *Vita* and the scholarship it inspired. In each instance, Penn observes, the author projected an image of Melania that served the political and social-historical commitments of his own time and place.

In a collection of essays like this one, the reader often struggles to find a meaningful thematic center. And while this volume is not exempt from that struggle, most essays here reflect Clark's warnings against the historian's essentializing the object of his or her focus. And so, knowing that neither Melania left behind any eyewitness testimonies, the essayists here search out the "traces" that one or the other might have left behind in their interactions with their world, its institutions and even such inanimate "characters" as its buildings. The editors worked hard to try to forge a unity here, in part by nudging the contributors—or so I suspect—to refer liberally to each other's essays. Although the resulting unity is not perfect, it is certainly discernible. As such the volume is an eminently worthy second monument to Elizabeth Clark's scholarship and its influence.

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