

BOOK REVIEW

Melania: Early Christianity through the Life of One Family. Edited by CATHERINE M. CHIN and CAROLINE T. SCHROEDER. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017. Pp. 344. Hardback, \$95.00. ISBN: 9780520292086.

M*elania* is a response to Elizabeth A. Clark's 1998 article "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn,'" in which she identified many issues with assuming that women presented in ancient texts were presented faithfully by their authors and outlines potential responses. Chin and Schroeder have gathered a group of scholars, many of them Clark's students, to respond to this call using one of Clark's early projects, namely, her translation and commentary on *The Life of Melania the Younger*. This collection focuses on this Melania and her grandmother, Melania the Elder, two powerful Christian matriarchs of late antiquity.

The fifteen papers in *Melania* are divided into six parts: "Aristocracy," "Body and Family," "Gender and Memory," "Wisdom and Heresy," "In the Holy Places," and "Modernities." There is a general introduction for the book and each part has its own short introduction. The parts are divided based on the topic of study, not the methodology of the authors. Indeed, the fifteen authors each apply different methods, making the book an interesting example of the wealth of techniques and critical approaches available to a classicist.

The papers in Part I focus on the ways in which the Melanias created a Christian elite by renouncing property while maintaining their social status. Chin focuses on the agency of buildings themselves, including the house of the Pinian and the monasteries the Melanias founded. Owning property created a relationship, and the Melanias outlined the proper relationship between a matron and the monasteries she founded. Marquis focuses not on physical inheritance but on the inheritance of traits, discussing the way in which authors tried to distance Melania the Younger from her controversial namesake. Finally, Schroeder discusses how Melania the Younger is presented as an emotional role model for elite female ascetics using an analogy to modern "influencers" and celebrities with large female followings.

Part 2, “Body and Family,” focuses on the physical aspects of asceticism and motherhood as exemplified by the Melanias. Doerfler argues that asceticism created a new form of motherhood where an elite matron can have “spiritual children” while avoiding the risk and pain of natural children. Furthermore, the Melanias, who both lost and left their children, provided a model for handling grief through asceticism. Upson-Saia discusses how the conception of pain shifted from a negative result stemming from sin to a positive, healing effect of asceticism, which comes from ancient medicine where wounds would often be a necessary result of surgery and healing.

Part 3, “Gender and Memory,” includes papers on the role gender played in the way ancient readers and authors presented holy people. Cobb studies how the *vita* evolved from the *passio* and *acta*, allowing ascetics to redefine the experience of martyrs in a less violent time. Krawiec argues that Palladius’s Melania is a queer person, enabling her to interact with men because of her “nonnormative female sexuality” (131).

Part 4, “Wisdom and Heresy,” discusses the different ways in which the Melanias were treated with regard to the religious debates of the 5th century and later. Robin Darling Young investigates the way Melania the Elder is presented in Evagrius’s letters, arguing that Evagrius understands Melania as an author and teacher, an Origenist and an esoteric. This version of Melania contrasts with that from Paulinus’s letter and the depiction of Palladius. Drake compares the Greek and Latin versions of the *Life of Melania the Younger*, claiming that the Latin translator edited Pelagianism out of the original Greek version and added Augustinian language. Shepardson further argues that Gerontius’s original version of the *Life of Melania* was decidedly anti-Nestorian and thus did attempt to present Melania the Younger as orthodox.

Part 5, “In the Holy Places,” highlights the role of the Melanias in the emerging pilgrimage movement. Jacobs studies the appeal of Jerusalem for a group of elite, Roman, Christian émigrés, drawing comparisons to Paris’s appeal to American expatriates after the First World War. These people used migration to create a new identity. Shoemaker uses the accounts of Egeria and the Jerusalem Georgian chant book to present Jerusalem as a worship space and the scene of experimental forms of worship, focusing particularly on the growth of devotion to the Virgin Mary.

The final part, “Modernities,” focuses on the receptions of the Melanias through time. Penn discusses the discovery of the Latin *vita Melaniae* and the way in which the early press about the text still influences the way Melania is

understood. Davis studies the way in which Coptic leaders have reclaimed Melania as an example for modern women. Castelli offers a new way in which to study the Melanias now that their identity as women is so deeply questioned. Castelli's solution is to focus not on their gender identity but on their identity as saints.

Diversity of thought is the chief value in this collection. From spacial syntax to gender theory, this collection provides examples of new methods of research that emerged after "The Lady Vanishes." Readers looking for a definitive take on the Melanias will be disappointed as there is little agreement among the authors here. To use gender as one example, Melania the Younger is described by Schroeder as a "gender-bender" (52) and masculine but by Doerfler as "profoundly maternal" (80) Krawiec presents Melania the Elder as queer but Schroeder and Young highlight her manliness.

The largest issue with the book is purely textual. The Greek alphabet is not used in the main text despite the fact that most sources on the Melanias are Greek (although Greek is used in the notes). Most papers in the collection do not engage in source criticism, focusing instead on modern interpretation of texts. The reader, therefore, is expected to be familiar with Paulinus of Nola, Palladius, Gerontius, Evagrius and others, making this book suitable for advanced graduate students and specialists in Late Antiquity and Christianity, particularly those which focus on sexuality and gender. This book would serve as a good primer of the variety of feminist approaches to antiquity and is a fitting response to "The Lady Vanishes."

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