Arietta Papaconstantinou with Muriel Debié and Hugh Kennedy, eds., *Writing 'True Stories': Historians and Hagiographers in the Late Antique and Medieval Near East*, Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages 9 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2010). Pp. xi + 230; €70.

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The authors of this important, wide-ranging collection probe the liminal space between event and narrative in order to explore genre, authorial method, and the use of stories to establish, expose and negotiate community boundaries. In particular, since their project challenges the genre distinction between history and hagiography, the volume explores "the all too neglected relation between [these genres]," considering them together as "the two main narrative modes of representing the past in the late antique and medieval Near East" (p. ix). This question is all the more interesting in the chapters dealing with Syriac sources (the focus of this review), because the same technical terminology was sometimes used by both historians and hagiographers to refer to their compositions (as discussed by Walker on p. 40 and Debié on p. 43).[1]

Joel Walker eloquently contributes to this discussion by showing how Babai the Great (d. 628) utilized the genre of hagiography not just for the presentation of exemplary lives, but also for ecclesiastical boundary maintenance in the fraught political landscape of late Sasanian Persia. Babai mobilized "hagiography as a vehicle for the writing of recent history" precisely because "the providence of God was most clearly observable in the authenticated stories of holy men recorded by contemporary observers" (p. 39). By adopting this genre, recent saints and martyrs became allies and spokesmen for Babai in his quest to unify the Church of the East "at a time when, in actuality, serious and growing sectarian divisions threatened that unity" (p. 38). Yes, hagiography was "a form of spiritual exercise" (p. 36), but is was also a "powerful and supple tool to build…alliances" (p. 37) in a time when Babai knew that "his success in holding the church together…hinged on

[1] For the table of contents of the volume, see the publisher's website http://www.brepols.net/Pages/ShowProduct.aspx?prod_id=IS-9782503527864-1.

his ability to retain the support of key allies not only in Ctesiphon, but also throughout the western Sasanian provinces" (p.34).

The "creative freedom implicit in" the hagiographical genre gave Babai "considerable latitude" to, for example, incorporate "dramatic dialogues, staged in both public and private settings," giving the audience the chance to hear "not only [the martyr's] words, but also his thoughts" (p. 38). This dynamic, dramatic potentiality, unconstrained by the "somewhat rigid chronological framework of the chronicle tradition and also the documentary demands of the church history genre" (p. 40), allowed Babai to ventriloquize the martyrs, making them inspired defenders of "the orthodox (East Syrian) doctrine that Babai was fighting hard to establish" (p. 41).

As Muriel Debié observes, within a few decades of Babai's productive hagiographical enterprise there is an important shift in genre preferences among Syrian Orthodox and East Syriac writers. The Syrian Orthodox effectively stopped writing the lives of saints and instead "chose another way of writing [their] history, namely the universal chronicle divided into two sections, one ecclesiastical and the other civil" (p. 53). The Church of the East similarly turned to history, but primarily "monastic histories" (p. 56), which "rely on biographies" as their primary organizing structure (p. 58), and thus blur genre lines by falling "somewhere between hagiography and history" (p. 50). The difference is one of focus: "Monastic biographical histories…[provide] a spiritual portrait of individual ascetics, whereas in the ecclesiastical histories we are merely presented with key items of biographical data, often short, and usually related to contemporary historical events of individuals" (p. 50). Debié's discussion of this interesting genre is an important contribution to the volume's theme.

The rich historiography of the Church of the East is far from well known, and the heart of Debié's impressive chapter is an expert survey of what she calls "the visible islands of a much larger continent which has been swallowed up either by the neglect of later generations…or by the accidental loss of manuscripts" (p. 55). One of the largest of these visible islands is the *Book of Governors* by Thomas of Marga (fl. 9th cent.). Thomas gives a particularly "clear idea of what it was to write history and hagiography in the early Middle Ages" because he "speaks willingly about…his aims and his methods" (p. 64). Thomas took as his model the work of Palladius,

and counted among his sources numerous lives (now lost) that constituted the "literary celebration" of the "new centre of monasticism developed in Bet ʿAbe" (p. 65). But Thomas intended "to write history and not hagiography" (p. 65). Thus he rejected the extravagance of metrical lives, arranged his narratives in chronological order as best he could, teased out "rare fragments of dated information to be found in those texts or what he knew from other sources about the succession of abbots" (p. 65), and eschewed "vain imaginations of [his] own" in favor of reliable literary sources (p. 66). Moreover, he made "a critical examination" of his sources, sometimes using "several for the same Life" (p. 67).

Debié also explores Thomas's work as a hagiographer, providing an interesting counterpoint to what we learn of him as an historian. In the introduction to his *Life of Cyprian*, appended to the *Book of Governors*, Thomas describes his visit to the monastery where Cyprian had lived in order to examine all the surviving texts relevant to his life. What he was shown was material "written in a simple manner" which formed the basis of his own "spiritual treatise" (p. 67). Thus, as Debié notes, "we have here a unique record both of the existence of raw material for hagiographical writing in the monasteries, and of the method of the hagiographer—who searched, even hunted, for such sources on the spot and then reworked them in order to produce an account in a higher literary style" (p. 67). Thus even when Thomas did utilize his own imagination, he did so based on the available sources.

In the fascinating chapter by André Binggeli we move from the Syrian Orthodox and East Syrians to the Melkites, where we find that the turn to history was not universal in the early Islamic period. On the contrary, in the Melkite community "hagiography continued to be a very productive literary genre throughout the Umayyad period and the first century of the ʿAbbāsid period," though "full-scale martyrologies" survive only in Greek, Arabic, and Georgian (p. 77–78). Binggeli explores this "striking dissymmetry between the hagiographical production in the Melkite and Jacobite communities" (p. 78) by examining the story of Anthony, an eighth-century Christian convert from Islam, as it survives "in Syriac [Syrian Orthodox] historiography and in Melkite hagiography composed in Arabic" (p. 79).

The story of Anthony and other similar accounts illustrate the difficulties experienced by Christians living under the caliphate, as

do events of a similar nature such as the "destruction of churches or accounts of harassment and persecution" (p. 88). The Melkite hagiographical sources are, in contrast, deliberately protreptic and exemplary: "The story of Anthony is intended to serve as an example for anyone who wishes to convert from Islam to Christianity" (p. 91). Ultimately, however, these sources served to maintain the boundaries between the Melkite community and an increasingly dominant and persistent Islamic caliphate. Thus, this and other Melkite hagiographical texts join the emerging genre of polemical literature "as a means of countering the threat of apostasy and Islamization" (p. 92).

The authors of this significant volume move beyond the poetics of historiography to explore the work that history and hagiography are doing in the late ancient and early Islamic periods. The three chapters that focus on Syriac sources make important contributions to the overall project of the book, while also materially advancing our understanding of the Syriac sources. In this respect the volume is exemplary. The addition of a cumulative bibliography and an index could, perhaps, have improved the utility of the book.