

André Binggeli, ed., *L'hagiographie syriaque*, Études syriaques 9 (Paris: Geuthner, 2012). Pp. 304; €45.

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*L'hagiographie syriaque* is the ninth volume of the *Études syriaques* series of the French *Société d'études syriaques* whose president is Alain Desreumaux. The editor of this volume is André Binggeli. Once again, the *Société* has gathered several noted scholars to dedicate a volume to an important field of Syriac Studies, in this case hagiography. Besides the literary legacy of Syriac hagiography, this book is also concerned with the iconographic aspect of the hagiographic tradition, and several illustrations are included at the end of the book. As in the previous volumes, a bibliography is included, both general and for individual saints. An index of the saints mentioned in the book is provided, which further enhances its usefulness for the interested scholar.

In his general introduction, André Binggeli summarizes the history of the academic study of Syriac hagiography. He draws attention to the difficulties of defining “Syriac hagiography,” given that the genre of hagiography in general tends to cross boundaries of language and community. So it is not always easy to determine whether a text belongs to the corpus of Syriac hagiography or not, in addition to the issues of defining “hagiographic literature” altogether. Therefore, the *Société* has decided to discuss “Syriac hagiography” in a broader sense and to include iconographic, liturgical, and historiographic perspectives on hagiography.

The first article is by Muriel Debié. In her essay “*Marcher dans leurs traces*”: *Les discours de l'hagiographie et de l'histoire*” she undertakes the task of outlining the relationship between Syriac hagiography and historiography. The categorical difference made between hagiography and historiography as genres of premodern literature is the product of modern scholarship. This discussion had an ideological background, as the recent scholarly literature on Western and Byzantine hagiography quoted by Debié shows. Hagiography with its miracles and champions of faith was disqualified as a source without historical value. It is important to note that this distinction

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between hagiography and historiography was drawn in a different way in premodern times. To outline this relationship, Debié divides her essay into three parts: (i) the production of Syriac hagiography in its historical context, (ii) the attitudes of ancient historians towards hagiographic traditions and literature, and (iii) the attitudes of modern scholars towards hagiographic literature. In the first part, she points out that the production of hagiographic literature mostly dates from periods of struggle for and crisis of group identity, citing several examples of how hagiography can unify or separate, depending on the author's aims. In the second part Debié explores hagiographic elements in Syriac historiographic literature. Here, the difference between modern and premodern perceptions is most apparent. Syriac historiographers commonly quote hagiographic texts as legitimate historical sources. Therefore many hagiographic accounts can be found in the works of Syriac historians such as Michael the Syrian.

In the final section, Debié returns to the question of modern scholarship and hagiographic literature. She criticizes the positivistic view of hagiography expressed by 19<sup>th</sup>-century scholars and emphasizes the possibilities that a scientific approach to hagiography can yield, especially in the field of social and cultural studies. In particular she highlights that groups often neglected by other sources, such as women and children, receive more attention in hagiographic literature. Debié's article makes the case that hagiographic literature is significant for both ancient and modern historiography. As a result she addresses both the ancient and modern conceptions of historical facts, showing how Syriac hagiography can be a fruitful source for modern historical scholarship. Debié's essay is an important contribution to the research on Syriac hagiography since she collects insights from scholarly discussions of Latin and Byzantine hagiography and applies them to Syriac hagiography.

The next article, "*Les collections de Vies de saints dans les manuscrits syriaques*," is by the editor of the volume, André Binggeli. He deals with an interesting, yet neglected subject: the order of hagiographic stories in medieval Syriac manuscripts. He starts with the arrangement of hagiographic stories of different origin in Syriac manuscripts, presenting several criteria used by scribes to arrange and order hagiographic legends, such as by topic or geography. Next, he discusses collections of saints' lives that were designed as such, such as the *Historia Lausiaca* of Palladius or the *Book of Governors* by

Thomas of Marga, where the arrangement is determined by the author not by the scribe. Another subject Binggeli explores is the transdenominational use of manuscripts. He outlines two types: manuscripts with hagiographic accounts of saints coming from different Syriac denominational backgrounds, and manuscripts with marginal annotations with denominational content, often polemical. His essay concludes with discussing for whom hagiographic literature was written and by whom these texts were read. He finds no evidence for a liturgical use, but comes to the conclusion that the hagiographic texts were written for monks who would read these works for edification in their cells, although lay people might have read them also.

The role of the saints in the liturgical tradition is the subject of David Taylor's essay "*Hagiographie et liturgie syriaque*." He agrees with Binggeli that Syriac *vitae* were read by monks as literature for edification outside the church, and not read out loud in the liturgy. In his essay, therefore, Taylor explores the liturgical tradition of commemorating the saints. In doing so, he aims to demonstrate the value of this aspect of liturgy for those interested in the development of the Syriac cult of saints and in local hagiographic traditions. With this in mind, he provides a very useful survey of liturgical sources for hagiographic research in the diverse Syriac traditions. He does this in two steps. First, he gives a short overview of the transmitted liturgical calendars of each Syriac tradition, with focus on the commemoration of the saints. He starts with the oldest one, contained in the famous manuscript British Library Add. 12,150, which dates back to 411 CE, before the great schism of Eastern Christianity. Second, he casts light on the diverse Syriac traditions (Church of the East, Syriac Orthodox, Melkite, and Maronite), giving a valuable account of available sources. The many similarities between the different Syriac traditions demonstrate how interwoven they are, although many regional differences are observable. Following this overview of the liturgical background of hagiographic material in Syriac besides the *vitae*, he gives a more detailed description of their content. Again he gives special attention to the differences and similarities between the traditions. Finally he sums up the benefits scholars of hagiography can derive from liturgical material. Altogether, this essay is a very helpful overview, giving scholars very good insight into the existing material and

into the many possibilities liturgical traditions offer for hagiographic studies.

The fourth article, “*L’hagiographie versifiée*,” is by the doyen of Syriac Studies, Sebastian P. Brock, who offers the reader a typology of the Syriac hagiographic poetic tradition. He starts by giving a short introduction to the different lyrical forms that contain hagiographic themes. He outlines four types of *memre* (narrative *memre*, homilies in verse, panegyric *memre* and *memre* on the model of Greek *encomia*) and three types of *madrashe* (standard *madrashe*, narrative *soḡyata* and dialogue *soḡyata*). His main interest in examining these kinds of texts is the question of original information about the saint given in the text. Thus his examples are mainly from the early period of Syriac literature. All in all, this article is a useful supplement to Brock’s article about Syriac hagiography in Volume I of the *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography*.<sup>2</sup>

In her essay “*Les Actes des martyrs perses: transmettre l’histoire*” Christelle Jullien gives an overview of the *status quo* of scholarship concerning the tradition of the Persian martyrs, i.e., the martyrs of the persecution of Christianity in Persia between the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and the early 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. She starts with a very short summary of the existing text editions, then goes straight to the analysis: First she discusses the two main categories by which the texts in question are classified in modern scholarship, i.e., either by the time of the events in the text, or by the time of composition of the *Acts*, insofar as this can be assessed. Jullien also discusses early translations of the *Acts* into Greek and Armenian and thus emphasizes their widespread reception in Christianity. Finally, she mentions possible authors of the *Acts* (Marutha of Maipherqat, Aḥḥa, and Abgar), and briefly outlines the scholarly discussion concerning their authorship. Following this literary approach, Jullien turns her attention to the contextual frame of the *Acts*. She points to the importance of the contemporary persecution in Persia, as mentioned above, and puts the texts firmly in this context. At the end of her essay, she explores the many possibilities that these *Acts* offer for historical scholarship, especially concerning Sasanian Persia. On the whole this essay gives a very good introduction to the present state of study of the Persian martyr traditions.

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<sup>2</sup> S. P. Brock, “Syriac Hagiography,” in: S. Efthymiadis, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography, Volume I: Periods and Places* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 259–283.

In the sixth essay of this volume, "*Figures de l'hagiographie syriacque dans la tradition arménienne ancienne (Salita, Jacques de Nisibe, Maruta de Mayperqat)*," Valentina Calzolari explores the influence that Syriac hagiography had on the Armenian tradition. After a short introduction to the general relationship between early Syriac Christianity and Armenia, she looks at Syriac saints in original Classical Armenian texts. She demonstrates how these traditions about Syriac saints were increasingly "Armenianized" over the course of time, while still preserving original Syriac material. She demonstrates this through a diachronic analysis of the Armenian traditions of the three saints mentioned in the title. Based on her case studies, the author comes to the conclusion that the Syriac influence is preeminent in the early tradition, but that later a tendency to harmonize these Syriac traditions with the competing and similarly strong Greek influences in Armenia can be observed. As a result, a specifically Armenian tradition emerges. This is an illuminating essay that highlights the importance for Syriac studies to engage with the Armenian tradition.

The next essay, "*Saints populaires d'Édesse*" by Lutz Greisinger, offers an excellent summary of the most important saints of the Edessene tradition. He starts with the earliest hagiographic literature of Edessa, namely the *Doctrina Addai*, the Tradition of Thomas, and the *Finding of the Cross* by Protonike. These stories were written in order to emphasize the early—even apostolic—origins of Edessene Christianity. The author continues with the traditions around the ecclesiastical Fathers Ephrem and Rabbula, followed by ascetic figures such as the Man of God (in western traditions "Alexis") and Sophie and her daughter. Finally, he looks at the Acts of Sharbel and other martyrs. In his description he demonstrates that all these accounts have an anti-Roman tendency. For example, Edessene paganism is viewed in more benevolent terms than Roman paganism. He also demonstrates how the Edessene hagiographic tradition encompasses all social groups of the city, thus giving them a collective local identity. Overall Greisinger offers an excellent introduction to the hagiographic tradition of Edessa and its value as a source for scholars.

In her essay "*Images des femmes dans l'hagiographie syriacque*," Jeanne-Nicole Saint-Laurent provides a fine description of the different types of female saints in the Syriac tradition. She depicts them as Daughters of the Covenant, missionaries, nobles, and

ascetics who hold fast to their faith and their duties against all odds. Furthermore, she emphasizes their importance in diverse hagiographic works as mothers of holy men and companions of their brothers in their ascetic calling. Saint-Laurent puts special emphasis on the legend of Febronia of Nisibis, whose tradition crossed boundaries of linguistic and denominational traditions and is even found in modern Sicily.

Jack Tannous explores in his essay "*L'hagiographie syro-occidentale à la période islamique*" the Syriac Orthodox hagiographic tradition about saints who lived in the Islamic period. He briefly surveys hagiographic traditions in liturgical calendars and historiography, before examining the few Syriac Orthodox *vitae* about these saints. He identifies five *vitae*: Gabriel of Qartmin, Marutha of Tagrit, Theodute of Amid, Simeon of the Olives, and John of Mardin, though only three of these lived exclusively in the Islamic period. Tannous is interested in historical information about the daily life of Christians in this period, and in particular the relationship between Christianity and Islam and their influence on one another. He also looks at the very interesting interdenominational aspects of these hagiographic texts. At the end of the article, Tannous draws attention to a field of hagiographic literature that has been largely neglected in scholarship so far: hagiographic traditions that were written in medieval times depicting the lives of earlier saints. He gives several examples of these, but there may be many more, as the question of the date of composition is often not yet solved satisfactorily. Indeed, further scholarship on this literature is desirable.

In her essay "*L'art au service de l'hagiographie: la représentation des saints dans la tradition syro-occidentale*," Rima Smine provides an overview of the illumination of saints in Syriac Orthodox manuscripts and mural paintings from the 11th to 13th centuries, although she also looks beyond this time span and this particular Christian tradition. She orders the saints according to the following typology: Apostles and Evangelists, Bishops and Church Fathers, military saints and martyrs, ascetics and monks, female saints, and "holy lay people" (Constantine and Helena are the only examples here)—giving for each category a short description of the relevant mural paintings as well as of the illuminations available to scholars. Some of the depictions are also given as illustrations at the end of the book. Her descriptions of the mural paintings and analysis of their layout in the churches are of particular interest. With respect to the

illuminations, I recommend having a copy of Leroy's collection of Syriac illuminations<sup>3</sup> at hand while reading this article since she often refers to his work and his tables. Her descriptions are all the more valuable because the exact locations of the illuminations and paintings in the manuscripts or in the literature are given. Unfortunately her descriptions are sometimes rather sketchy and her analyses are not easy to follow, so the interested scholar has to look to the source of her statements. Thus, for instance, she is mistaken when she does not take into account the direction of Syriac reading, in analyzing the placement of the depiction of the Evangelists in manuscript illuminations (p. 254). When opening the manuscript Vat.sir. 559,<sup>4</sup> one will find the depiction of Matthew at the same place as on fol. 2r of Paris BnF syr. 356: at the upper left side, but this time in an illumination that was designed for two pages (Vat.sir. 559) instead of only one (Paris BnF syr. 356). But disregarding these flaws, this essay remains a valuable introduction to the iconographic depiction of the saints in Syriac tradition.

In the final article, "*Art et hagiographie: la construction d'une communauté à Mar Behnam*," Bas Snelders deepens the general information Smine has given in the previous article. He gives a short overview of the medieval art in the then Syriac Orthodox Mar Behnam monastery south-east of Mosul,<sup>5</sup> summarizing part of his fascinating thesis published in 2010.<sup>6</sup> He starts with the legend of Mar Behnam, which became fixed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, approximately at the same time as the building of the monastery was completed. He demonstrates how the literary as well as the sculptural evidence points to an attempt to create a regional identity, thereby creating a common history of the Syriac Orthodox monasteries of Mar Behnam, Mar Daniel, Mar Matti, and Mar Abraham the Great. This unifying purpose of the art in the monastery was achieved by emphasizing not only the connection between the patron saints of

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<sup>3</sup> J. Leroy, *Les manuscrits syriaques à peintures. Conservés dans les bibliothèques d'Europe et d'Orient* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> For the illumination see [http://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS\\_Vat.sir.559/0005](http://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.sir.559/0005). It is indeed fortunate that this and various other manuscripts of the Vatican Library are now in the public domain on the internet.

<sup>5</sup> In modern times, it used to be Syriac Catholic until it was partly destroyed by the Da'ish in 2015.

<sup>6</sup> B. Snelders, *Identity and Christian-Muslim Interaction. Medieval Art of the Syrian Orthodox from the Mosul Area* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010).

the above-mentioned monasteries, but also the opposition to the rival Church of the East, for example by depicting a martyr (Sahdona) who was killed in the doctrinal quarrels of the late 5<sup>th</sup> century. Snelders demonstrates that ecclesiastical art is an important instrument for strengthening group identity in the same manner as hagiographic and historiographic literature. The main difference is that mural paintings in monasteries and churches are also perceived and understood by illiterate people, for whose allegiance the members of the different denominations competed.

Overall this book gives a good overview of the state of scholarship on Syriac hagiography. While scholars of hagiography usually focus on the literary heritage, this volume also includes adjacent areas of hagiographic research by giving liturgical and iconographic perspectives on the topic as well as the presentation of hagiographic texts in manuscripts. The tradition of the Syriac Orthodox Church, however, is represented more than the other Syriac Christian traditions. A little odd is the fact that the editors had the original English articles translated into French, which will surely reduce the circle of people who can profit from these essays, but this is only a minor flaw in another fine volume of the *Études syriaques* series.