

PUBLICATIONS AND BOOK REVIEWS

Elizabeth Key Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran*. The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 28. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. 227 pp. + xxii with bibliography.

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- [1] In this fascinating study Elizabeth Key Fowden draws upon a multitude of literary and material sources to describe the growth and dispersion of the cult of the martyr St. Sergius in Syro-Mesopotamia from the fourth through the seventh centuries, C.E. She begins with the *Passio* of SS. Sergius and Bacchus, a fifth-century Greek account of the two famous soldier-martyrs. Critical analysis in the light of historical and topographic data (with occasional forays into the Syriac, Latin and Metaphrastic versions of the *passio*) yields the probability that the saints were executed under Maximin Daia in Augusta Euphratensis in 312 C.E. Rather than tarrying over its elusive historical core, however, Fowden rapidly shifts her gaze to the *Passio* itself and to the first homileticians who show familiarity with it: Severus of Antioch and Jacob of Sarug. Among other points of interest here is the fact that Rusafa, a town in the Syro-Mesopotamian plain, was identified in these earliest literary sources as the place of Sergius' martyrdom and burial as well as the center at which his cult developed and thrived.

- [2] The first chapter, entitled "Portraits of a Martyr", ends with a shift from literary to visual images. Dated from the mid-sixth through seventh centuries and appearing in various media (including mosaic, encaustic, silver vessels, bronze and silver jewelry, stone carving), they fall into two types. First, there are portraits (often of the two saints together) which show dependence on details of the *passio* (such as the *maniakia*, neckgear worn by soldiers, the removal of which plays a role in the progressive humiliation of the martyrs). Second, there are portrayals of Sergius as a rider saint. The latter image, she argues, is related to the Arab rider god, Aziz, and was "disseminated from the pilgrimage shrine at Rusafa" with a clear awareness of the relevance of this image to

the lives of Arab pastoralists as well as others in the frontier zone between the Roman and Iranian Empires.

- [3] In the second chapter, "Martyr Cult on the Frontier," Fowden turns to Bishop Marutha of Maypherkat and his establishment of the shrine for Roman, Syrian and Iranian Christian martyrs at this city of Sophanene in the mountains at the northeast edge of Syro-Mesopotamia. Emphasizing Marutha's "cultural flexibility" and "political savvy," she argues that his intent was to establish a symbol simultaneously of "*détente* and, at the same time, defense" in a place that he saw as the fulchrum between the two mighty empires, rather than as an outpost (pp. 52, 54, 57). The third chapter, "Rusafa", begins with the presentation and analysis of the historical sources as well as of the archeological remains recently excavated under the direction of Thilo Ulbert of the German Archeological Institute. Fowden's work, as she acknowledges, builds upon the insights, published and on the way to publication, of both Ulbert and Gunnar Brands in order to present a comprehensive view of the famous pilgrimage site. The center at Rusafa should be seen in terms similar to Marutha's Martyropolis – as having strategic importance and as a "place of convergence". Not only did trade routes pass through Rusafa, but it was -- as is well known -- a place where Byzantine rulers and their Iranian, Arab Christian and Arab Muslim counterparts ostentatiously expressed their faith in the healing powers of Sergius and their gratitude to him. In the third and especially in the fifth chapter, "Frontier Shrine and Frontier Saint," Fowden considers the motives of pious sovereigns from Justinian and Theodora, to Khusrau II, and al-Mundhir, who bestowed lavish gifts on the shrine at Rusafa. Here she persuasively argues that these rulers were not simply displaying personal piety but were astutely engaged in accomplishing a combination of political, cultural and religious goals.

- [4] The fourth chapter details "The Spread of the Sergius Cult in Syria and Mesopotamia" through evidence drawn from a wide range of material and literary sources: prosopography, inscriptions and hagiography among them. A picture emerges of churches, martyria, monasteries and men dedicated to the powerful martyr in three distinct locales: the Hawran, in cities and towns crucially located on the routes of Roman Syria, and scattered through the Iranian Empire from Sargahan near Nisibis to Bethsaloe near

Ctesiphon. Especially through the efforts of Ahudemme and Marutha of Takrit monasteries dedicated to Sergius in eastern Mesopotamia provided “services... carefully tied to the terrain – shelter for travelers, food, drink, and security for their financial resources.” (p. 126) These not only brought the wandering tribes under stronger Christian influence, they also provided a model for Ummayyad imitation.

- [5] The final chapter takes the cult of Sergius into the early Islamic period, examining the continuation of the Christian devotion as well as the development of a parallel Muslim reverence for the soldier martyr. Clearest evidence of the latter is al Hisham’s addition to the architectural complex at Rusafa. The book ends with a brief discussion of the scattered evidence of ongoing Muslim interest in Sergius as healer and defender.

- [6] The book is a valuable synthesis of the emergence and dispersion of the cult of Sergius. It is a model of the integration of literary and material sources. Maps and black and white photographs helpfully illustrate the argument. Equally commendable is the thoughtful analysis of topography and the persuasive argument for its critical impact on the development of this particular saint’s cult at this time and place. This will be a worthwhile addition to the libraries of students of late antiquity, early Christian and Byzantine history and early Islam.