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## Albrecht Berger (ed.), *Life and Works of Saint Gregentios, Archbishop of Taphar. Millennium Studies 7* (Book Review)

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The publication of these three texts concerning the life and works of St. Gregentios should facilitate the investigation of a new set of fascinating and important issues. But the pioneering nature of the publication forces us to ask: what issues? Due to the mysterious provenance of these texts and the misty historicity of Gregentios himself, it is not clear whether they tell us more about the literary activities of Middle Byzantine monks or the attempted Christianization of the Jewish state of Himyar (roughly modern Yemen) in the time of Justinian. In this first modern edition B. edits and translates the traditional group of texts that he calls the dossier: a substantial saint's life of Gregentios; Gregentios' law code used purportedly to Christianize the Himyarite state; and a lengthy debate between Gregentios and a Himyarite rabbi. As an introduction and critical/historical background the editor Albrecht Berger, hereafter B., aided by a substantial contribution from Gianfranco Fiaccodori, hereafter F., argues that a 10th-century monk in Constantinople composed these texts as a fictional compilation drawn from a wide variety of available source material. In so doing B. and F. survey the existing scholarly literature in a lively and judiciously thorough way, but I am left with the impression that their efforts will spur a good deal more discussion. So I will start with a summary of the book's content and end with a few comments on the book's contentions.

The book breaks down into two major sections: first, the introductory material on the date, authorship and location of origin; and, second, the text and translation. B. starts with a useful summary of the *Bios* of St. Gregentios and uses that to launch a discussion of a variety of interpretive problems arising from his reading of the saint's life. B. is clear that he wants to posit Gregentios as a fictional construction of the 10th-century and employs, for instance, his survey of the early travels of Gregentios to demonstrate that they were drawn from a late 8th century, northern Italian source that must have been translated into a Greek text that reached the library of our 10th-

century monk/author. Separate sections on travels in Agrigentum (because of the saint's strange name drawn from *Agrigentinus?*), Carthage, Rome and Alexandria reveal further threads of sources from various other saints' lives and lead to a conclusion that books 1-8 were composed as a life by a monk in the monastery of Maximina in Constantinople. Because book 9 shows much more plausible historical material, the task is left to F. to discover a source that brought this material to our author.

Most of F.'s second chapter discusses the historical setting of Gregentios' endeavor to Christianize Himyar and concludes that the details indicate Arabic influence. As with B.'s discussion of Northern Italian sources above, F. then explains how this material came into the hands of our 10th-century Constantinopolitan author. This chapter will be very useful to those attempting to lay out all the strands of evidence for and against a conversion of the Himyarite people by an East Roman missionary bishop in Justinian's reign. F.'s impressive familiarity with various Arabic, Ethiopic and Syriac source materials, datable to the 6th-century and from the Islamic period, makes this chapter interesting even for specialists working on the Gregentios literature and the late antique Middle East.

Having worked through the *Bios*' origin in detail, in the next chapter B. takes up a discussion of the second text in the dossier, a bizarre law code traditionally called the *Leges Homeritarum* but more accurately and simply called *Nomoi* in this edition. A less thorough effort (than for the *Bios*) is made to pin the text to 10th-century Constantinople, but B. includes some interesting comparisons with other fictional Byzantine law codes and strong linguistic arguments to bolster his theory of authorship.

The last text in the corpus, the dialogue between St. Gregentios and the Himyarite rabbi Herban that B. calls the *Dialexis*, also earns less attention than the *Bios*, though B. brings in some interesting theological arguments surrounding the Monothelites, Judaism and Islam to argue for his 10th-century dating in Constantinople. In the discussions of both the *Nomoi* and *Dialexis* B. economically makes reference to the other leading theories on dating and provenance and judiciously limits his own reactions to these positions while continuing to point towards his 10th-century Constantinopolitan monk. The commentary section is capped by a short but useful discussion of the language used in the dossier.

This historical section is followed by two philological chapters introducing the remarkable scholarly achievement that this first critical edition of this dossier represents. First, B. lays out the extant manuscripts clearly and succinctly with useful descriptions of each one's character. Second, he delves into the history of the text concluding with simple and convincing stemmata for the *Bios* and *Nomoi* and then

going into much more detail and complexity with the *Dialexis* (which has many more extant mss.). Even those who are not text critics (myself included) will admire the thoroughness and transparency of this discussion.

The texts and translations make up the remainder of the book. Even a quick survey of any page will immediately impress a reader with the detailed reports of variants and thorough explanation of difficulties. Those few who have struggled through these texts in *Patrologia Graeca* 86 will be particularly pleased. Not only has B. convincingly reestablished a more accurate text than that in the *PG* (with significant differences), but the ease of reading and copious notes, including scriptural references, make it a pleasure to work with.

This pleasure is only enhanced by copious end material. In appendix 1 B. includes a truncated version of *Bios* 1-8 that only appears in ms. K. Appendix 2 includes a fascinating discussion of Gregentios' liturgical presence, specifically an *akolouthia* for his feast day on December 19th which he compares to interesting parallels for similar bishop's *akolouthiai*. A full survey bibliography follows that I believe all scholars working in this area will find useful. Then the book ends with four indices: three for the text/translation, a general index, Greek word index and index of texts cited; and a general index of the historical discussion. All of these are thorough and will prove useful.

This first translation of the dossier into English will open this text up to a much broader readership, especially among historians who may have been reluctant to read through the garbled text of the *PG*. The English is not always of a literary quality, and there are a significant number of typos and errors, though few of these are more than a slight distraction, and these probably only to native speakers. For instance, there is an error on each of the first three pages of the *Nomoi*: "we may safely obey to his immaculate orders" (413 for "obey his immaculate orders"); "the stain of their sin and abonimation" (415 for "abomination"); and "I do not regard as a sin by my husband" (417 for "I do not regard it as a sin"). Similar distractions pop up enough that readers will wish that the press had edited more carefully, but the translation is consistently accurate and readable. This translation will serve well to relate the historical, literary and theological aspects of this Greek text which, after all, will not soon be considered a deathless example of Greek art prose.

I was not completely satisfied by the strong emphasis on the mid-10th-century monk in Constantinople as sole author/redactor. B. and F. describe and attempt to dispel, for instance, the hallowed discussions of Nina Viktorovna Pigulevskaia and Irfan Shahid both of which find significant 6th-century historical material in this dossier.<sup>1</sup> There appears to be a good deal of unexplored middle ground here. And B. and F.'s reliance on source critical method has led them to concede a good deal of earlier and possibly

contemporary writings melded into the present texts. In addition to the strong emphasis on a single author, some of the mechanics of argumentation I found less than satisfying. For instance, on page 63 F. makes the plausible hypothesis that the original mission to Himyar must have been Miaphysite due to the leanings of the Ethiopian conquerors. But on page 85, while arguing against Pigulevskaia's position that the mission was sponsored by the East Roman State, F. cites his point on the Miaphysite mission from page 63 as conclusive. First, there really is no evidence to make definite claims in this area. Second, we do know that Justinian's court sent out Miaphysite missions, for instance the one sent by Theodora to Nubia in 542. The mysteriousness of Chalcedonian-Miaphysite relations in the period of Justinian are therefore too complex to allow for simple judgments that the Roman state only operated within a Dyophysite context--beyond the obvious example of Justinian's wife Theodora's famous Miaphysite position I could point to John of Ephesus' claim that he, a card carrying Miaphysite, operated as Justinian's official converter of the heathen.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that B. and F.'s arguments on authorship and context are not persuasive, but rather I suspect that the brevity forced on them by the form of this publication has left many ambiguities to be pursued by others. One of these jumps directly to mind: why did sudden interest in Gregentios arise in 950 in the Byzantine capital? Why emphasize the 10th-century redactor so heavily as to fictionalize Gregentios when there is ample evidence even in the *Bios*' fictionalized text that there was a historical core to this story? In short, why would a 10th-century monk in Constantinople decide suddenly to compile some 300 pages (in this edition) in order to sanctify the legend of St. Gregentios, a legend situated in the historical attempt to convert the Himyarites in the reign of Justinian? And why does this likely 10th-century redaction draw us away from using the text to understand the 6th century? There is no doubt that questions like these will be raised and fruitfully discussed in the near future, and all such discussions will owe a great deal to this ground-breaking work of scholarship.

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## Notes:

<sup>1.</sup> N.V. Pigulevskaia, *Vizantiia na putiakh v Indiiu: iz istorii torgovli Vizantii Vostokom v IV-VI vv.* Moscow, 1951 (translation published in German in 1969, *Byzanz auf den Wegen nach Indien*); I. Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najrân* (Brussels, 1971) and *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (Washington, D.C., 1994).

<sup>2.</sup> John of Ephesus *Ecclesiastical History* 3.36ff., *Patrologia Orientalis* 18 pp. 660-81.