

REVIEW

MARTYRS AND COMMUNITIES

Katharina Degen, *Der Gemeinsinn der Märtyrer. Die Darstellung gemeinwohlorientierten Handelns in den frühchristlichen Martyriumsberichten*. Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge, 64. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2018. Pp. 347. Paperback, €54.00. ISBN 978-3-515-12153-8.

This revised doctoral dissertation joins a rapidly growing library of studies that consider texts about early Christian saints from literary angles. Degen's focus is not so much on verifying or falsifying the historicity of the events narrated in the martyr texts she investigates, but on what they can tell us about the concerns of their authors and, by implication, of their contemporary audience. She focuses on the very promising question of the ways in which her texts—a selection of both pre- and post-Constantinian martyr acts, passions, and letters narrating martyrdom—present their subjects as concerned with the welfare of their community (or, often, their intersecting communities).

Chapters 1 to 3 (11–83), which outline Degen's methodology, are very much worth reading. Her approach is well contextualised in current sociological treatments of the ancient world more generally. Concepts relating to community, both ancient and modern, are discussed in helpful detail, and Degen gives a good account of the various ways in which the martyrs presented in the texts discussed may function as models for identification. Her account of the place, time, content, and meaning of the martyr texts studied is equally well grounded in up-to-date scholarship. The discussion is carefully thought through and presented with great clarity.

The three methodological chapters are followed by a very long chapter 4 (84–224), with two major and many minor sub-sections investigating individual aspects of community with which the martyr texts engage, from the family to the Roman empire as a whole. Close readings of individual texts selected for the purpose reveal how the authors accept, reject, or replace traditional Roman values. The material here is very rich and full of interesting details, but the focus on individual relationships and individual passages means that Degen cannot fully elucidate in what sense the texts used to illustrate the authors' social attitudes and rhetorical moves are representative of the corpus as a whole. Only sporadic attention is paid to the question of the texts' influence on each other. The same text is occasionally used to illustrate different points under different headings, but with little sense of its overall texture. The lack of an index discourages the reader from joining up recurring details: to

take an example at random, the author discusses uses of inclusionary and exclusionary ‘we’ in a way that might permit larger conclusions, but the organisation of the discussion prevents that.

More broadly, the argument of the book as a whole positions itself against the notion that martyrs, rather than community-orientated persons, might be considered solitary and exceptional, and, in their rejection of the dominant norms, as anti-social by definition. However, this side of the discussion is only alluded to very briefly in the preface, with reference to the modern phenomenon of ‘the destructive behaviour’ of Islamist suicide terrorists, who are ‘self-styled martyrs’.¹ It seems to me that the book would have gained much from engaging much more seriously with the idea that Christian martyrs could also be considered selfish mavericks—and, conversely, with the argument that today’s Islamist suicide attackers could also claim to be motivated by the idea that they were aiding their extremist community. This unexplored territory means that Degen’s work should stimulate other studies that supplement its investigations—whether along the lines I have offered or in other ways.

The final ninety-two pages of the volume (255–347) contain an appendix with translations of the texts discussed, including their divergent recensions and different versions as transmitted in Latin or Greek respectively. Most of these translations are in German, some are in English; many have been published elsewhere, and some are the author’s own work. This appendix is helpful for those readers—probably a majority—who will not have all of the necessary editions readily available, given how voluminous and wide-ranging is the type of literature from which Degen selects. While the collections of Seeliger and Wischmeyer (cited by Degen) and now of Rebillard do something to improve this situation, it seems to me that a generally accessible electronic database of reliable editions and translations of the material would be highly desirable to obviate the need for such stopgaps.²

The presentation of the book is very neat overall, with only a small number of minor typographical errors. The overall value of this work is twofold. Firstly, it furthers theoretical assessments of ideological patterns in martyr literature; and, secondly, it provides students and scholars with case-studies in the close reading of these texts, which prove, incidentally, that the shared beliefs of their authors do not prevent the texts from having their individual points of (sometimes fascinating) interest.

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¹ ‘[Das] zerstörerische Verhalten der selbsternannten Märtyrer’ (9).

² Hans Reinhard Seeliger and Wolfgang Wischmeyer, edd., *Märtyrerliteratur* (Berlin–Munich–Boston, 2015); Éric Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives about the Ancient Martyrs* (Oxford, 2017). Rebillard’s work appeared too late to be taken into account by Degen.