

Kyle Smith: *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia. Martyrdom and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity*. Oakland/CA: University of California Press 2016 (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 57). XXIII, 231 S. \$ 95.00/£ 79.95. ISBN: 978-0-520-28960-4.

Eusebius of Caesarea was the most successful ecclesiastical historian of Late Antiquity – though in some respects, perhaps too successful. He managed to convince contemporaries and later generations alike that the history of the Christian church was coterminous with that of the Roman Empire and the Greco-Latin cultural world it contained. Eusebius wrote in the heady days of Constantine the Great (r. 306–337), the first emperor to convert to Christianity, so perhaps he should be forgiven for his boldness.

Unfortunately, Eusebius' vision of Christian community had two pernicious side-effects down the ages. The first was to marginalize in the history of the church those Christians who lived outside the Roman Empire. The most important of these were the Syriac-speaking Christians of Persia and areas further east. Despite their ancient roots and large numbers, they hardly featured in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, an omission that continues to yawn across most modern histories of Christianity, which omit them altogether. The second was to tether non-Roman Christians politically and ideologically to the fortunes of Christian emperors inside Rome. That is to say, Christians outside the empire were presumed to have common cause with Rome – indeed overriding loyalty to it – on the basis of their shared beliefs. By contrast, they were presumed to be alienated from their own societies and under the constant threat of persecution, ruled as they were by non-Christian kings (Zoroastrians in the case of Iran).

Kyle Smith's new book, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia*, carefully explodes both of these myths. Drawing on texts from both sides of the Roman-Persian frontier, he shows how religion undergirded the conflict between these great powers to a far lesser extent than many late antique authors would have us believe. By combining Roman and Iranian perspectives in this way, Smith's book contributes to the renaissance in Sasanian studies that has occurred during the past two decades. It is helpful to read his conclusions alongside the works of scholars such as Adam Becker, Matthew Canepa, Christelle and Florence Jullien, Joel Walker, and especially Richard Payne. In different ways, all of these historians have

injected new life into the study of Late Antiquity by refocusing our attention on the Iranian world. They have also injected new life into Sasanian studies by exploiting Syriac Christian sources. These texts – especially the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* – are among the most important bodies of evidence for Sasanian history writ large. Yet they remain woefully understudied, hence the significance of Smith's work.

The starting point of Smith's book is a famous letter which Constantine sent to his Iranian counterpart, Shapur II (r. 309–379), in the mid-320s. In this letter, Constantine announced his loyalty to the Christian God and proclaimed that this God had enabled the victories of the Roman army. According to the narrative, this communiqué threatened Shapur's standing but also endangered the Christians of his realm, who were henceforth seen as agents of the Roman state, and thus, a fifth column to be managed and suppressed. At the time of his death in 337, Constantine was preparing for war against Persia. Later sources portrayed this campaign as an effort to liberate the Christians of the Sasanian Empire from Shapur's persecutions, thus casting Constantine as the savior of the Persian church.

In contrast to the established narrative, Smith argues that Constantine actually took little interest in the welfare of Persian Christians as such. What concern he did express never became a pretense for intervening in the internal affairs of the Sasanian Empire, much less launching a major invasion against it. Constantine's letter must be read as part of the emperor's universalizing rhetoric and not as a claim of jurisdiction over foreign churches. Likewise, the abortive campaign against the Sasanians was mainly about grabbing land; the protection of local Christians emerged only later as a post-facto justification.

Whereas the first three chapters of Smith's book focus on Greek and Latin sources from Rome, the second three focus on Syriac sources written inside the Sasanian Empire. These sources similarly undermine the impression that Constantine's conversion provoked any kind of persecution in Iranian society. In Chapter 4, for instance, Smith argues that some of the key texts historians have used to prove the existence of violence – including the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat – are in fact exercises in Biblical exegesis rather than records of real events. Likewise, accounts of the Persian martyrs, many of which were composed generations after the events allegedly took place, tell us more about identity formation and historical memory in later periods than “real” persecution in the fourth century. This is especial-

ly true of the textual tradition surrounding Simeon bar Šabba‘e, bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, who was executed in 339, but whose two biographies were written in the fifth century. This also applies to the *lives* of several martyrs under Shapur who were Roman captives but whose biographies were written to mimic Roman hagiography. Two images of Constantine emerge from these texts: Western observers remembered him as a protector and patron of Persian Christians, while Eastern observers claimed that he had died by the time the persecutions began, and therefore, he could not have intervened to stop them.

Trying to say something new about Constantine is like trying to harvest a crop from a field that has been tilled over and over for years. It can be extremely difficult unless one manages to replenish the soil or use new techniques to farm the land. There is perennial interest in the first Christian emperor, but debate usually hinges on a limited body of information that has been analyzed from every conceivable direction. Smith’s triumph, therefore, is to add a new dimension to the Constantine story by looking at him from a novel perspective. By examining Constantine through the lens of the Sasanian world, and in particular, Sasanian Christians, he manages to break free of Eusebius and his domineering narrative. This will pay dividends for our understanding of this major figure in world history, as well as the history of Christianity in Late Antiquity more broadly. That Smith’s book is so clearly written, well organized, and tightly argued further ensures its impact on the field.

What Smith gives us is essentially a deconfessionalized account of Roman-Sasanian conflict. This is healthy for a variety of reasons, one of which is that it focuses our attention on non-ideological factors in the history of war, a lesson that could be applied equally to the Sunni-Shi‘i rivalry today, the Cold War, or other contemporary conflicts. But playing down the role of ideology has its costs. If the religious dimension of Roman-Sasanian conflict is really just in the mind’s eye, and if persecution and the identities that flow from it are simply “textually constructed category[ies]” (p. 179), then how do we make sense of their enduring appeal to late ancient readers? Even if a text is written long after the events it purports to describe, surely it captures an element of lived reality in order to attract an audience, resonate with their experiences, and merit copying for posterity?

In the case of the fourth century – a historiographic swamp in which our sources obscure as much as clarify what happened – the skepticism of

Smith's book may be prudent. But it leaves the reader occasionally unsatisfied. "Christian identity," Smith notes in his conclusion, "was so fluid, multiple, and geographically, chronologically, and textually contingent that it is hard to discuss with any real meaning" (p. 180). By thoroughly embracing nominalism in this way, Smith perhaps inadvertently renders his own object of study ("religious identity in late antiquity," the subtitle of the book) analytically insignificant. One wonders whether this is self-defeating. A historian must strive to perceive patterns amidst contingency, not to allow contingency to dominate the narrative to such an extent that patterns become even harder to see, if not irrelevant.

This small observation notwithstanding, *Constantine and the Captive Christian of Persia* is a welcome contribution to an important field of study. Through it, we become reacquainted with Constantine as if meeting a new person. We also transcend the Roman-Persian frontier to see a history that becomes only more interconnected the more we understand it.

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