

Philip Burton (ed.): Sulpicius Severus' *Vita Martini*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017. xv, 298 p., 2 maps. £ 120.00/\$ 155.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-967622-4.

The image most often associated with Martin of Tours is of a mounted figure cutting his cloak in half to clothe a beggar. That story comes early in the *Life of Martin*, written close to the end of the fourth century by his disciple Sulpicius Severus; and the familiarity and ubiquity of that image is just one indication of Martin's immense popularity as one of the first wonder-workers to have lived out his life in western Europe instead of the far-flung (for most readers of Latin) deserts of Egypt or Syria.¹ Hence there is no need for any elaborate justification of this volume by Oxford University Press, containing an introduction, text, English translation and commentary on the *Life* written by Sulpicius; and its attractiveness is guaranteed by the fact that the scholar who has taken on this task is Philip Burton, an impeccably thoughtful and sensitive guide to the Latin literature of late antiquity. Jacques Fontaine's three-volume French edition in the series *Sources chrétiennes* has long been the starting-point of any serious research into Sulpicius's *Life*, and at fifty years old retains its importance; but Burton's edition now sits alongside it as a fundamental resource for anyone with an interest in the *Life of Martin*, whether novice or specialist.

The introduction does an excellent job of establishing Sulpicius, his world, and his writings, before moving on to the topic of Martin. Here Burton is an outstanding guide to debates which have raged for a century or more, and especially to the perennial problem of the chronology (and therefore historicity) of Martin's life and career. The issues are logically and patiently set out, and Burton provides the original sources while representing fairly the most significant recent interventions, in particular those of Stancliffe and Barnes.² He does not himself decide between the rival 'long' and

1 But does that image, playing on the iconography of the triumphant Roman cavalryman, really derive from Sulpicius? Burton (at 160) seems to say so, but I see nothing in the text to say that Martin was on horseback during the encounter.

2 He unwittingly (at 18) enshrines an error, however, in relaying Stancliffe's claim that Martin could have been a deacon at age twenty, given Ambrose of Milan's consecration at age twenty-four; Ambrose's letters show that he lived well into his fifties, which requires him to have been at least thirty and probably closer to thirty-five at the relevant time.

‘short’ chronologies at every turn; perhaps more usefully, he observes that accurate chronology might not even be expected of a hagiographer relying on second-hand information which, even by the time it reached him, had no doubt been sensationalised. This would be a factor even if Sulpicius sincerely aspired to be a sober and accurate historian; but Burton further notes that classical historiography was only one of many influences on a work which, if not yet part of an identifiable genre of ‘hagiography’, nevertheless built on ancient biography including popular stories of martyrs and biblical heroes. That these parallels amount to a consistent use of ‘typology’ is more doubtful, and although Burton accepts it he is careful to downplay it. Indeed, the table he presents (33–34) in ostensible support instead emphasises how far Martin’s life and career departs from the pattern of the Hebrew prophets and the desert fathers. As a former soldier turned itinerant exorcist and lastly monk-bishop, Martin perhaps required a new kind of biography. And although it was not entirely unprecedented, given Jerome’s dabbling in the genre, the most important innovation for Burton, it seems, is the language in which the story is told.

Hence the longest section of his introduction treats Sulpicius’s Latin style – unsurprisingly, given Burton’s established expertise in Late Latinity. He begins by identifying ‘Christian’ elements in the text: for the most part openly Christian words and usages, but also some that he sees as covert or ‘semi-covert’ signs of Christian identity (45). The discussion then proceeds from the regular use of *variatio* to the text’s more distinctive syntax, sentence structure and sound effects, and explores in detail Sulpicius’s apparent exploitation of quantitative as well as accentual rhythms. In the commentary itself Burton is tireless in tracking down allusions and references to both classical and biblical Latin: the latter more difficult since the Vulgate was yet to achieve its ascendancy. Sulpicius’s engagement with Sallust in particular is reaffirmed, and Burton accounts him the strongest influence while maintaining that the text is more than simply Sallustian. I found all this material helpful.

In the commentary, however, I am not sure that all the excursions earn their place. An example is the discussion inspired by the word *missionem*, in the account of Martin’s dramatic departure from his career in the Roman army (165–167). Burton’s comments set out the scholarship on honourable or not-so-honourable discharges from the legions; and he notes that while Martin’s refusal to fight can hardly have been honourable, his apparent lack

of infamy as a deserter may mean that he gained a legitimate discharge on psychological grounds – something Burton considers ‘far from impossible’ for ‘a soldier of marked religious eccentricity and general disengagement from military life’ (166). To me this overstates the extent to which Martin is presented as a misfit: on the contrary, Sulpicius depicts him as a model soldier, unusually frugal and moral but nonetheless loved by his comrades and officers. It also ignores that the point of the story is that Martin was not granted a discharge at all, but was instead accused of cowardice and forced to fight in the front line – a fate from which he was saved by the miraculous cessation of hostilities. In fact Sulpicius does not tell us how Martin left the army; but if the rest is accurate, his departure can have had little to do with standard operating procedure.

This indulgence would not be worth objecting to were it not that other points of interest, at least to me, are passed over. In the commentary on chapter 6, as Martin is returning to Gaul, the phrase *de civitate exire compulsus* attracts two observations: that the usual formula for exile from Rome is *ab urbe discedere*, and that Sulpicius may be deliberately varying it; and that *exire compulsus* recalls the Vulgate’s Exodus 11:1. But what city is here referenced by Sulpicius? From context it must be in Illyricum, and may be Sirmium, as Burton perhaps intends; but was Martin then present at (or around) one of the notorious mid-century councils in that city? This is a minor point, but hardly more so than the nature of Martin’s military discharge, and seems more likely to trip up the reader. Likewise, in chapter 17, as Martin exorcises demons in Trier, a manuscript reading affects whether a demon possesses a *paterfamilias* or the family cook. Burton in his introductory note on the text offers a defence of his choice (of the cook) and his explanation is as transparent and reasonable as ever. But the commentary on this passage makes no reference to the crux, nor any difference it would make. Given that good manuscripts give us a possessed *paterfamilias*, I would have liked to see the implications explored. But no commentary can cover everything, and perhaps these are no more than matters of taste.

In addition to the introduction and commentary, Burton offers a Latin text and English translation. The text is mostly that of Fontaine, with the few points of difference detailed in the introduction and Burton’s decisions fully defended. The translation is reliable, although I noticed two phrases omitted: at 11.4, *vulgi errore celebratum*, and at 17.5, *qui in interiore parte aedium morabatur*. Presumably this is an error, since both add information: the lat-

ter forms part of the story of the possessed cook, or maybe *paterfamilias*, and might have raised the question of why it should need to be stated that a cook was waiting inside the house. Elsewhere, the translation seems strangely disconnected from the points being made in the commentary: hence the valuable note on 6.3, *animo ac mente conceperat*, traces the phrase to Plato via Cicero; but Burton's translation ('fulfilled his desire and purpose') seems to take little account of the connection. Nor is there any consistent effort to mimic the stylistic effects of Sulpicius's text: for example, the parallelism at 1.4, *perennem potius vitam quam perennem memoriam quaerere*, is preserved in most translations, but is ignored (in favour of alliteration?) in Burton's 'to seek not a lasting memorial, but the life that lasts forever'. With the Latin text alongside there is of course a case for disregarding such effects. But at other times Burton is pedantic in honouring the Latin, even without making good sense in English: hence at 13.6, *ruinam suam ... minitari* gives us a falling tree that 'menaced its ruin'.

As that may suggest, the main feature of Sulpicius's text that Burton preserves is its archaism. The translation is often strikingly antiquated: after dividing his cloak, Burton's Martin looks ridiculous 'with his clothing thus abridged'; whereas Carolinne White's 1998 translation has 'chopped up' and Richard Goodrich's 2016 version has 'cut off'. If this is intended ironically, that seems not the case at 22.2, in which demons 'goaded him with wanton tongue'; or 27.2, when 'never was there aught on his lips but Christ'. Such archaisms can obscure the meaning: when the cook's demon is 'driven out in an attack of the flux' (17.7), the euphemism follows the Latin (*fluxu ventris egestus est*) but perhaps with excessive delicacy; even in 1954, F. R. Hoare held his nose to provide 'discharged in the excrement', and White could balance fidelity and clarity with 'expelled in a flow of diarrhoea'. And even Alexander Roberts in 1894 did not translate *contempti* at 20.7 with 'contemned', almost extinct even in his day: it is hard to see what is gained – when the Latin is right there – by choosing this obsolete cognate over Roberts's 'undervalued' or Hoare's and White's 'humiliated'.

Burton is at least consistent in his preferences, and a translator's note might have reconciled me to it. But it is doubtful that such archaisms in English have an equivalent effect to Sulpicius's Latin. The *Life of Martin* was written, as Burton reminds us, in 'literary prose ... with close affiliations to poetry' (78). One consequence of this is that it did not sound like the Bible. But in reaching back to Wycliffe with 'aught' and 'flux' and to

the King James Version with ‘contemn’, Burton makes Sulpicius a fogeish preacher, instead of a sophisticated wordsmith.

But none of this should not detract from Burton’s achievement. There are many good translations of the *Life of Martin*, but there is nothing in English to match Burton’s comprehensive and scholarly volume or its attentive and erudite commentary. I have mentioned my disagreements on points of detail, but in truth these are few and far between, and I am delighted to see this text get such serious and comprehensive treatment. I noticed very few typos, and only one (175: *secus securis*, I suppose for just *securis*) which caused more than a moment’s confusion.³ Instead what confusion emerges is based, as in only right, on what Sulpicius actually wrote. Martin comes across in the *Life* as, in the words of a student of mine, ‘serially hapless’. Is there bathos, as Burton suggests, in the elaborate style in which Sulpicius describes Martin’s accidentally setting fire to a house or falling downstairs? Was it really necessary to have him rescued so often by angels? The *Life of Martin* is not as securely heroic as later stories might have suggested, and there are still sufficient mysteries in it to make it a work of real interest to scholars. We should be grateful that they have such a dependable guide to the text as this volume now provides.

3 Others are ‘part’ for ‘apart’ (13); ‘Chin (2007)’ for ‘Chin (2008)’ (137); ‘the obviously difficulty’ (152); ‘make it clear’ for ‘makes it clear’ (180); and the highlighting of various footnote numbers, seemingly left over from the proof stage.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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