

Anne P. Alwis: *Narrating Martyrdom. Rewriting Late-Antique Virgin Martyrs in Byzantium*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2020 (Translated Texts for Byzantinists 9). XIV, 210 p. £ 85.00. ISBN: 978-1-78962-155-6.

Volume 9 in the series ‘Translated texts for Byzantinists’ by Liverpool University Press offers three first time translations of what can be said to be a particular sub-genre in hagiography: narratives about the lives and deaths of virgin martyrs.<sup>1</sup> The virgin martyrs in question are Saint Ia of Persia, Saint Horaiozele of Constantinople and Saint Tatiana of Rome, and the translations of their lives and martyrdoms are rendered in the specific editions attributed to, respectively, the monk Makarios (late thirteenth/fourteenth century), the contemporary statesman Constantine Akropolites, and an Anonymous ninth century scribe. Alwis explains that the selection of these three texts is founded on some striking similarities as well as differences that lend them to interesting comparative analyses. All three texts are about virgin martyrs, and they are all found in the same fourteenth century Florentine manuscript. At the same time, they stem from three different authors/redactors with very distinct voices and agendas. As Alwis argues, this allows for more nuanced readings of the rhetorical strategies of each individual redactor, as well as importance of their historical context and intended audience.

The translations themselves, however, only make up a smaller portion of this book. The major part (114 of 185 pages) is dedicated to a very thorough and detailed introduction, where Alwis offers new readings of these three texts. Through meticulous contextualized readings of each text, Alwis argues that each “editor” rewrote and adapted the textual traditions to fit with their own political agendas. The rich introduction thus is a monograph in itself, with the three translations almost functioning like an appendix at the far back of the book. This is not necessarily a negative thing. The first part provides valuable information and analyses, with theoretical discussions that bring out intriguing conclusions. Students and readers who are new to the topic or

1 For the Latin West, see e.g., M. B. McInerney: *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc*. New York 2003 (The New Middle Ages), K. C. Kelly: *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*. London/New York 2000 (Routledge Research in Medieval Studies 2).

specific period might however find it useful to start by reading the translations first, and then move on to the analyzes of them that is provided in the first part of the book.

The book starts with an introduction, in which the material, central theoretical terminology and thesis are presented. The author's aim is to demonstrate how "the praxis of rewriting Byzantine hagiography between the eight and fourteenth centuries [w]as a skillful initiative in communication and creative freedom, and [...] a form of authorship" (p. 1). Hagiography, Alwis argues, offered a very distinct communicative platform for revisers/authors. A central concept of modern narratology employed by Alwis is that of focalization, i.e., "when the perspective of the narrator shifts from one character to another" (p. 8). This, Alwis argues, allows us to see how the different rhetorical devices facilitated communication and audience engagement (p. 9). "Once we locate the narrator's voice among the other character-voices within the text, we can better understand the communicative/persuasive authority the narrator claims." (pp. 8–9).

One of Alwis' main points, is the plasticity of hagiography, and how the dynamic process of constant rewriting and revision has shaped the narratives. Reading them with a focus on the author/editor, even when this person is not identified (as for 'Anonymous'), Alwis highlights how we can trace historical layers and adaptations that reflect very specific individual aims as well as historical contexts. "Regardless of what an audience may read into the text, the writer owns the discourse, dictating and shaping their audience's thoughts." (p. 21). Without disregarding the importance of the audience and the reception of the texts, this interest in the writer/reviser as someone who intentionally shapes the texts with skillful rhetorical tuning allows Alwis to tease out some significant nuances about the restrictions as well as freedom to experiment that framed hagiography as a genre, and thus the revisers' work.

Alwis also points out how hagiography, with its potential for double-discourse, could be seen by revisers as a particularly apt genre for some kinds of communication: "Hagiography may thus easily perform a dual function: to commemorate the saint and simultaneously become a vehicle for social engagement or lobbying." (p. 26). As becomes clear though Alwis' reading of the martyr narratives, rewriting can indeed be more than just a linguistic updating of a text (p. 28): "My aggregated readings indicate that Byzantine revisers/authors recognised that this form of sacred literature allowed space

for pedagogy, political commentary, social advancement, and ideology, as well as functioning as devotional material. Hagiography's plasticity is partly a result of its combination of transmitted cultural memory with an invented tradition." (p. 29).

The introduction is then followed by a chapter about the authors (pp. 31–43). Attribution, authorship and dating is thoroughly discussed and footnoted. The chapter called "Adaptation" is indeed the longest part of the book (pp. 45–114). Alwis here acknowledges the methodological challenges of this kind of work, for instance deciding which of the texts among a number of editions and adaptations should be considered "the original" (p. 45). The potential loss of unknown versions also complicates this tracing.

The chapter starts with a detailed rhetorical analysis of Makarios' *Martyrdom of Ia*, followed by Akropolites' *Adaptation of the Martyrdom of Horaiozele* and Anonymous' *Martyrdom of Tatiana of Rome*, that is, the same order chosen for the previous chapters and for the translations. Here, the choices of each reviser are meticulously traced by comparison with other extant narratives about the same martyrs, as well as through detailed examination of the rhetorical and literary strategies. The political and historical contexts for each reviser thus also come to the fore. In conclusion, Alwis argues that hagiography was recognized as a communicative platform that, in many cases, might reach out to a wider audience than other textual genres. The saint's role as an intermediary being between the human and divine realms, also entails that religious authority is conferred to the author/reviser. An interesting point is how the text itself becomes transactional, as Alwis argues: "the author requests the saint to aid him in conveying his message, which can be couched in terms of the greater good. In return, [the saint] receive[s] his simulacrum, which simultaneously enables the author to advertise and promote his pressing concerns." (p. 113). There are indeed many interesting questions to be pursued following this line of approach to hagiography, not least in terms of genre and gender. The bibliography promises forthcoming contributions by the author that seem to address some of these topics in more details, and for which I, at least, will eagerly await (especially p. 99, note 308).

The translations themselves are very accessible and capture the different authors' style in a very convincing manner, as Alwis also states as her aim in a short note on the translations (p. XIV). They are amply footnoted, and the

Greek is often rendered for transparency. As first-time translations to English, these texts, and the monograph that introduces them, are valuable additions to the extant research, and provide new insight and perspectives for anyone interested in mediaeval history and hagiography.

---

Sissel Undheim, University of Bergen  
Professor, Study of Religion  
Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion  
Sissel.Undheim@uib.no

**[www.plekos.de](http://www.plekos.de)**

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Sissel Undheim: Rezension zu: Anne P. Alwis: *Narrating Martyrdom. Rewriting Late-Antique Virgin Martyrs in Byzantium*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2020 (Translated Texts for Byzantinists 9). In: *Plekos* 24, 2022, S. 41–44 (URL: <https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2022/r-alwis.pdf>).

---