

Mark the Deacon: Life of Porphyry of Gaza. Translated with Introduction and Notes by Jeff Childers, Claudia Rapp and Michael Whitby. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2025 (Translated Texts for Historians 89). XVI, 259 p., 1 ill., 3 maps. £ 120.00/\$ 160.00. ISBN: 978-1-83624-334-2.

The *Life of Porphyry of Gaza* attributed to Mark the Deacon is an attractive document for the historian of socio-economic *realia*, powerfully seductive thanks to its wealth of detail and its claim to have been composed by a contemporary witness who was a close collaborator of its subject. Alas, as Michael Whitby makes clear in a detailed, lucid introduction and as is further emphasised by the comments in the notes that he and Jeff Childers have provided to accompany the translations of the Greek and Georgian versions respectively, this claim cannot be accepted at face value.¹ Various items, such as the author's use of the *Historia Religiosa* of Theodoret, reveal the *Life* to be anything other than a document composed soon after the death of its subject. Accordingly, the details furnished by the *Life* and its overall narrative must be viewed with extreme caution. While a review of the evidence does not suggest that the author was as fond of fiction as the problematic individual responsible for the *Historia Augusta*, frequent 'errors' and inaccuracies and glaring omissions together point to an author who arguably wrote hagiographical fiction at a remove of a century or more from the date of the death of the protagonist of the *Life*. While it seems excessive to doubt whether Porphyry of Gaza actually existed², there is much to be said for the thesis that the *Life* was created on the sole basis of the bishop's funeral inscription.³ Be that as it may, the *Life* offers a lively narrative (focussed on a few, select episodes in the bishop's life) and benefits from the air of verisi-

- 1 It is to be remarked, as Whitby does at p. XV, that Claudia Rapp has presented a somewhat less sceptical vision of this document in her own, prior publications.
- 2 So, for instance, doubt has been expressed by the following: Cameron 1987: pp. 355–356, n. 60 (cited by Whitby in the Introduction at p. 21, n. 87); MacMullen 1984: p. 87 (cited by Whitby in the Introduction at p. 30, n. 116).
- 3 Busine 2013: pp. 338–342; cf. Whitby in the Introduction at pp. 24–25. Whitby believes that “there is reason to have some confidence that the story of Eudoxia's actions is not a complete fabrication” (p. 25), but apparently thinks that the source of information must have been something other than an inscription. For the case of the *Vita Abercii*, which did derive from an inscription, see Rapp 2012: pp. 298–299, which is cited with other bibliography by Whitby in the Introduction at p. 24, n. 102.

militude that its author gave it. Hence, while it cannot today be naively trusted as a faithful witness of historical detail, it does serve a distinct purpose: it furnishes historical *tableaux* that are engaging and memorable and it reveals how a late antique audience in the East imagined a Palestinian city at the dramatic moment of the community's conversion to Christianity. Independent of the historical reality of Porphyry, Mark, and Salaphtha, or their interactions with various historically documented figures, the *Life* forcefully depicts what people thought it meant to live in a Christian Roman Empire. As such, it is on a par with such documents as the *Vita Abercii* and historical romances like *The Three Musketeers* or *The Name of the Rose* or the *Iliad*. Although potentially disconcerting for those in search of 'hard facts', there is nothing scandalous about this. It is a well known fact that novelists and dramatists often create historical images that are far more effective than those of professional historians. An episode may not be true (strictly speaking), but that need not disqualify it from being *ben trovato*.

This volume in the Liverpool University Press series "Translated Texts for Historians" contains complete translations of both the Greek and the Georgian versions of Mark the Deacon's *Life of Porphyry of Gaza*. A detailed table of contents (p. VII) is followed by a list of abbreviations (pp. IX–X), three maps (pp. XI–XIII), and a preface (pp. XIV–XV) outlining the contributions made to this volume by Jeff Childers, Claudia Rapp, and Michael Whitby. A black-and-white photograph (p. XVI, fig. 1) reproduces that surviving portion of the Madaba mosaic depicting the city of Gaza and its environs. Next comes a detailed, wide-ranging Introduction (pp. 1–52) that covers a variety of topics relevant to our appreciation of this text as a historical source. Subdivided into eleven sections, it deals with such issues as the content and reliability of the *Life*, the reality and sources of 'Mark the Deacon', the date of composition, and the relationship between the surviving Greek and Georgian versions and one or more hypothetical versions in Syriac and Greek. This magisterial survey of the various problems attaching to the *Life* is followed by a presentation of the text itself (pp. 53–227), with the parallel translations of the Greek and Georgian versions presented on facing pages so as to facilitate comparison and analysis. The modern subdivision of the text into chapters is maintained, thereby enabling the consultation of the critical editions as well as allowing for proper, scholarly citation. The Greek text, which is more ample, has 103 chapters, and the Syriac text observes the same subdivision despite its omissions from time to time. Like the intro-

duction, each of the translations is accompanied by a generous body of footnotes exploring and explaining significant aspects and problems. The volume concludes with an index of Biblical references (pp. 229–232), a glossary (pp. 233–234), a select bibliography (pp. 235–252), and indices (pp. 253–259) regarding people (pp. 253–255), places (pp. 256–257), authors, sources, texts (pp. 257–258), and topics (pp. 258–259). Aiming to be comprehensive and thorough, this volume furnishes scholars, students, and the general public with an attractive and extremely useful presentation of a well-known, but little understood text.

There is much to appreciate in this volume. First and foremost, the presentation of facing translations of the Greek and Georgian versions of the *Life* deftly enables readers – even those without a grounding in the two languages – to appreciate the problem of phylogenetic kinship of these texts. Indeed, it invites them to begin forming their own tentative conclusions regarding the question of priority and the relationship between the two recensions. Secondly, the notes provide detailed discussions that offer readers useful insights into the transmission and constitution of the texts that have been translated as well as relevant historical and cultural information. So, for instance, the girl’s name, which is reported as meaning “Irene” (i.e. “Peace”) in Greek, is transliterated in the Greek text as “Salaphtha” (*Life* 98). Whitby thinks that that “may be connected with the Syriac name Salamtha” (p. 218, n. 445), and Childers affirms that it “probably derived from the Aramaic Šelāmthā” (p. 219, n. 246). Readers are enabled to decide for themselves, and the irony of “shalom” or “peace” in names such as this and Jerusalem is unlikely to escape them. To cite another example, the Greek text describes the response to the petition of Porphyry and Mark as “a sacred rescript in the name of the two emperors” (*Life* 50)⁴, which formulation overlooks the fact that the eastern emperors Arcadius and Theodosius II had a western colleague who was also involved in the enunciation of law and therefore invariably included in any pronouncements; the oversight strongly suggests that the Greek version of the *Life* was composed in the sixth century, by which time people in the East were accustomed to thinking of the emperor residing in Constantinople as the sole source of law (p. 150, n. 263).⁵ Third,

4 It is worth adding that the omission of this detailed information from the Georgian text is yet another sign that the Greek was the original version or at least reflects more faithfully an earlier stage in the text’s history.

5 For further discussion, see Barnes 2010: p. 274.

the introduction provides readers with a solid grounding in the issues relating to the text, to the history of the later Roman empire in the East, and to the city of Gaza in Late Antiquity. Since the late sixteenth century, when the text was first presented to Western readers in printed format via Latin translation and then the Greek on which that translation was based, there has been a lively historiographical debate regarding the accuracy and reliability of the *Life*. Was the author ‘Mark the Deacon’ who he says he was? And can he be trusted as a reliable witness? Whitby does an outstanding job in the Introduction of summarizing this thorny debate, offering useful syntheses and some new evidence in the process, and the notes that accompany the two translations provide a further wealth of useful information. The fact that Whitby, Rapp, and Childers are not always in agreement – something which is sometimes remarked in the notes (e.g. pp. 23, n. 96; 40, n. 176) – is not a problem. What ultimately counts is the fact that they cumulatively provide readers with sufficient information to alert them to the major issues regarding this text so that they may think critically for themselves about the problems that it poses.

There is, of course, room for improvement. There always is. A handful of items will be highlighted here, since that may be of assistance to readers and perhaps of use in a future revision of this excellent edition.

To begin with, the discussion of the date of composition is not as clear as might have been expected. Reviewing the detailed, extensive discussions of predecessors, Whitby makes a large number of excellent observations that readers will find useful (e.g. the author’s reliance on Theodoret’s *Historia Religiosa*, the use of names belonging to people prominent in the early sixth century, and a likely point of linguistic contact between the *Life* and Justinian’s *Novel* 103). However, essential details or context are sometimes omitted or glossed over, in all likelihood because they have been taken for granted. Thus Whitby usefully informs readers that the “composition [of Theodoret’s *Historia Religiosa*] can be dated to 443/4” (p. 9), thereby furnishing a *terminus post quem* for the *Life*, but he omits to provide any comparable date of composition for the *Life of Euthymius* and the *Life of Sabas* by Cyril of Scythopolis, in spite of the fact that linguistic echoes make the date of composition of these works highly relevant (pp. 9–11). If we accept Whitby’s arguments for the anteriority of Cyril of Scythopolis, then the date of 556/558 for the *Life of Euthymius* means that the *terminus post quem* must be situated a

century later than the date explicitly stated by Whitby.⁶ It is to be added that the fact that Justinian's *Novel* 103 (which defined the figure of the proconsul of Palaestina) dates to 1 July 536 (p. 15) seems not to be the only Justinianic piece of legislation relevant to the date of composition. Henri Grégoire and Marc-Antoine Kugener remarked that the absence of an indiction from the date provided for the death of Porphyry in chapter 103 seems to provide a *terminus ante quem* of 537, since Justinian's *Novel* 47 required the use of the indiction in public documents and a rapid change in epigraphic habit can be observed.⁷

A second problem of note is the failure to explore further the possible milieu that generated the *Life* (p. 45, skirts the issue). A monastery seems quite likely, given both the content and length of the text as well as the fact that two of the witnesses for the Greek text seem to have originated in the monastery of St. John Stoudios.⁸ It should also be remarked that a Slavonic version of the *Life* has recently come to light and that this version likewise appears to have originated there.⁹ Such a milieu is altogether comprehensible, given the function of St. John Stoudios as a sort of clearing-house of ecclesiastical ideas in the imperial capital (and therefore the eastern half of the Empire) as of the fifth century. It would also help to explain the influence that the *Life* seems to have exerted upon John of Ephesus. In 542 John of Ephesus, who was associated with a Syrian monastery in the capital, was despatched to the provinces of Asia, Phrygia, Lydia, and Caria to convert 'Hellenes' to Christianity and to abolish the traditional cults.¹⁰ Reportedly he converted 70,000 people. This activity and his subsequent engagement in writing the biographies of Eastern saints (of the Monophysite persuasion) both seem to have drawn inspiration from the *Life*, even if no explicit connection is made in the sources. Manifestly not the work of someone living and writing in Gaza (pp.

6 It is to be added that Whitby concludes his discussion of the figure of 'Mark the Deacon' by observing, "An interval of a century or more between honorand and author might help to explain some of the errors in the *Life*" (p. 16). That points to a date of composition ca. 520–550. Cf. Barnes 2010: p. 283, "no earlier than the middle of the sixth century".

7 Grégoire/Kugener 1930: p. 145; Lampadaridi 2016: p. 233, n. 210; Feissel 1993: pp. 171–188.

8 Lampadaridi 2016: p. 39.

9 Id.: p. 66; oddly there is no mention of this whatsoever in the volume under review.

10 Bury 1923: vol. 2, p. 371.

8–9), the *Life* is in all likelihood a literary product of the monastic circles of Constantinople.

A third issue is that of the maps. The wealth of information furnished by these maps is likely to be of immense assistance to readers. However, thanks to a blunder in copy-editing, the first and third maps have the wrong captions. As the captions indicate, one proceeds (or ought to do so) from the general to the specific, i.e. from an overview of the eastern Mediterranean to the immediate environs of Gaza. Simple to rectify, the error in presentation really needs to be corrected before the paperback edition comes out. More sophisticated and insidious, on the other hand, is another cartographic oversight. Two of the maps contain the toponym “Palestina Prima”. In view of historical accuracy, that is a commendable step in the right direction. However, the reviewer would have used an alternative orthography and would have been more cautious about using the toponyms “Palestine”, “Samaria”, and “Arabia” in the second map, which is labelled “Holy Land”. Aside from the fact that ‘Holy Land’ was not a Roman administrative category, the use of an Anglicised form alongside forms that are often used in an English-language context makes for ambiguity that is unnecessary and possibly misleading. A solution on the order of that adopted by the maps accompanying the classic works of A. H. M. Jones and Ferdinand Lot would have been far preferable: lines clearly demarcating the provinces of Palaestina I, Palaestina II, Palaestina Salutaris, and Arabia.¹¹ Samaria ought to have been designated in Italics or another script, as the name did not designate a province and it therefore needs to be visually differentiated.¹² Lastly, while the map furnished by a fragment of the Madaba mosaic (fig. 1) is suggestive, an actual map of the city of Gaza and the location of archaeological remains would have been welcome.

A fourth issue is that of chronology. Whitby does offer a brief reconstruction of the life of the ‘historical’ Porphyry late in the Introduction (“Por-

11 Jones 1964: map 1; Lot 1931: map 1; cf. Lançon 1992: pp. 42–43.

12 The name of Israel was re-introduced thanks to the intervention of British Zionism. From the Balfour Declaration to the British Mandate for Palestine to the modern state of Israel, this modern ideology informed by historical nostalgia has resurrected an ancient construct, but that does not authorise us to employ linguistic forms that elide the distinction between past and present. Many a war crime has been committed by people citing history as justification, and it therefore behoves us to differentiate matters clearly and with precision.

phyry as Bishop”, pp. 40–43), logically after an extended discussion of the various historiographical problems with the text of the *Life*. The discussion is perceptive, and by and large persuasive. However, there are two minor problems. For one thing, in a volume that is meant to introduce readers to the subject, the discussion is surprisingly anemic as regards the question of chronology and dates. Whitby furnishes only two in the section “Porphyry as Bishop”: the year 380 is mentioned at p. 41, n. 179, and the sojourn at Constantinople in 401/402 is mentioned at p. 42. It would have been worthwhile to observe that Porphyry is reported to have died on 2 Dystros year 480 of Gaza (= 26 February 420) at chapter 103. As R. P. Hippolyte Delehayé taught generations of students of hagiography, the day on which a saint passed from this life to the other world is the fundamental historical *datum* from which everything else follows.¹³ Working backwards from that date, in fact, it is possible to use other information provided by the *Life* to arrive at the dates of Porphyry’s enthronement as the bishop of Gaza (395), his ordination as a presbyter (392), and his birth in Thessalonica (347). Since writing is comparable to maintaining a proper English garden and errors thrive like weeds¹⁴, it would have been of immense assistance to readers to provide this elementary information at this juncture. Secondly, since this biography is manifestly a work of literary fiction or historical romance (or, better, *Fälschung*), it would also have been of assistance to first-time readers to provide some sort of chronological overview that engages with the make-believe world of ‘Mark the Deacon’. What chronology emerges if we pretend that the author is *tout court* to be trusted? Something along the lines of the following table would result:¹⁵

- 13 For the ‘co-ordinates’ of a saint (viz. date and place of death), see Delehayé 1934: p. 282. The reviewer has a vivid recollection of this elementary point of methodology from a seminar taught at the University of Toronto by Prof. Timothy D. Barnes in the autumn of 1989.
- 14 For example, Whitby claims that Porphyry was “in his early 30s” (p. 60, n. 24) during his time in Egypt, viz. 381/382 to 386/387, which implies a date of birth in 351: the error stems from confusion between ordination as presbyter and enthronement as bishop. It is worth adding here that a similar error occurs in the blurb on the back-cover when reference is made to the events of 401–407: “early fourth century AD” ought to read ‘early fifth century AD’. That is an error that the publisher ought to correct before issuing the paperback version.
- 15 For a much more thorough table, see Lampadaridi 2016: pp. 27–29. That table, with its tripartite division, will be described in the next paragraph.

346/347	Birth at Thessalonica	<i>Life</i> 10 (roughly age forty-five when ordained presbyter)
381/382–385/386	Ascetic at Scetis	<i>Life</i> 4 (period of five years)
386/387–391/392	Ascetic near river Jordan	<i>Life</i> 4 (period of five years)
391/392	Living at Jerusalem	<i>Life</i> 4 (on account of illness)
392	Ordained presbyter	<i>Life</i> 11 (ordained presbyter three years before episcopate)
395: 18 March	Consecrated bishop	<i>Life</i> 103 (length of episcopate)
400: 23 September	Embarks for Constantinople	<i>Life</i> 34 (specific date)
402: 6 January	Baptism of Theodosius II; presentation of petition	<i>Life</i> 47–48 (seeming date)
402: 18 April	Embarks for Gaza	<i>Life</i> 54 (specific date)
402	Great Church of Gaza begun	
407	Great Church of Gaza finished	
420: 26 February	Death at Gaza	<i>Life</i> 103 (specific date)

Such a chronological survey might properly have been provided at the very outset of the Introduction so as to facilitate readers' comprehension of the detailed, complex discussion that follows as Whitby sifts fact from fiction.

Fifth and last, Whitby offers readers a cursory structural analysis of the *Life* in the Introduction (p. 3).¹⁶ Quite useful though that is, it obscures certain key elements of the narrative and the work's overall economy. The analysis

16 Whitby, Introduction (p. 3, n. 8), refers readers to Lampadaridi 2016: pp. 27–29 “for a more detailed breakdown”.

offered by Anna Lampadaridi in her 2016 edition is excellent and to be commended for its unusual clarity through the use of three columns to juxtapose chapters, content, and date. However, that analysis stands at the opposite extreme, in that it offers so much detail that the reader may miss the forest for the trees. Some sort of intermediate compromise seems required, along the lines of the following:

1–3	introduction: salutary biography of Porphyry
4–10	Porphyry's spiritual journey: from Thessalonica to Jerusalem
4	Thessalonica, Scetis, river Jordan, Jerusalem
5	Mark meets Porphyry
6	Mark disposes of Porphyry's wealth at Thessalonica
7–8	Mark returns to find Porphyry again in good health
9	Porphyry embraces a life of full poverty
10	ordination and asceticism of Porphyry
11–18	Porphyry installed as bishop of Gaza
11–12	people of Gaza consult the bishop of Caesarea, who chooses Porphyry
13–14	Porphyry learns the news and consults the Holy Cross
15–16	Porphyry consecrated bishop of Gaza
17–18	arrival at Gaza and installation in the bishop's residence
19–31	miracles of Porphyry at Gaza
19–21	miracle of rainfall
22–25	'resurrection' of Barochas
26–27	imperial letter closing temples
28–31	miracle of childbirth (Aelia, anticipating Eudoxia)
32–57	embassy to Constantinople
32–33	interview of Porphyry with John of Caesarea
34–36	meeting with Procopius at Rhodes
37	interview with John Chrysostom
38	interview with Amantius
39–40	interview (1st) with the Augusta Eudoxia
41	Eudoxia speaks with her husband the Augustus Arcadius
42–43	interview (2nd) with the Augusta Eudoxia
44	birth of Theodosius II
45–46	interview (3rd) with the Augusta Eudoxia
47	baptism of Theodosius II
48	presentation of petition to Theodosius II
49	petition discussed by Eudoxia and Arcadius
50–51	interview (4th) with the Augusta Eudoxia and making of arrangements

52–53	interview (5th) with the Augusta Eudoxia: farewell
54	interview with the Augustus Arcadius: farewell
55–57	voyage by sea back to Gaza; storm and conversion of the captain
58–74	destruction of the Marneum and other temples
58	disembarkation at Maiuma and re-entry to Gaza
59–61	episode at the Tetramphodon: destruction of a shrine of Aphrodite
62	rejoicing of Christians assembled in the church of Irene
63–65	arrival of Cynegius and destruction of temples
66–68	little child advises how to destroy the Marneum
69–70	razing of the Marneum
71–74	cleansing of houses; mass conversion to Christianity
75–94	construction of a new church
75–79	preparations for construction
80–83	miracle of three youths in a well
84	gift of Eudoxia for the church
85–91	debate of Porphyry with the Manichee Julia
92–94	completion and dedication of church; charity
95–102	persistent pagan hostility
95–96	riot over estates of the Church; flight of Porphyry and Mark
97–98	Porphyry and Mark find refuge with Salaphtha (Irene)
99	order restored to Gaza
100–102	Salaphtha becomes a consecrated virgin of Christ
103	conclusion: necrology for Porphyry

Certain analytical words occur here that are not to be found in the text of the *Life* nor in the notes or Introduction accompanying the translations, but which seem fundamental to assisting in our having a clear vision of what is being described, e.g. anticipation, embassy, and interview. Such an outline perhaps helps to clarify matters for modern readers, who are likely to find unmarked masses of text bewildering or annoying, and it highlights the fact that the *Life*, although apparently almost entirely a work of fiction, does reflect how Roman administration was commonly believed to work (cf. p. 30, n. 116).¹⁷ The *Life*, for instance, brilliantly evokes with its account of six interviews what must have often been the tedious, repetitive, prolonged reality

17 Cf. MacMullen 1984: p. 87. The reviewer agrees with Whitby, however, that the *Life* cannot be used as evidence for the specific reality of the late fourth or early fifth century.

of embassies in the Graeco-Roman world.¹⁸ Similarly, like the notice in the *Chronicon Paschale* regarding the creation and consecration of the original Hagia Sophia of Constantinople¹⁹, arrangements for charity are described in conjunction with the notice of the dedication of the church known as the *Eudoxiana* in honour of its imperial patroness. Such things seem worth signposting in advance for readers, whether they are colleagues who specialise in Late Antiquity or undergraduates making their first acquaintance with this text and the Graeco-Roman world.

There are many reasons to welcome this volume and to be grateful to its three authors, in spite of the issues raised here. Most importantly, precisely as the series “Translated Texts for Historians” promises, they have produced readable, accurate translations. In and of themselves, the facing translations of the Greek and Georgian versions of the *Life* will make it a rewarding experience to teach this text and to use it in survey courses and seminars. Secondly, there are few typographical errors, and they are readily corrected by readers themselves (e.g. p. 216, n. 440: “Porphyry” [line 10] and “n. 234” [line 12] instead of ‘Porphyry’ and ‘n. 243’). Third, the translations are accompanied by detailed, useful notes that clarify matters and refer interested readers to further bibliography. Fourth, the introduction to the volume is comprehensive and engaging. In view of the insidious pitfalls associated with a *Fälschung* as well known as this, that is no small achievement. Fifth and last, the indices are excellent, negotiating the opposed problems of completeness and detail and enabling readers to find items with ease. In short, “Mark the Deacon: Life of Porphyry of Gaza” is a welcome addition to the series, the volume is a stimulating scholarly work that is accessible to the general public at the same time that it makes full use of the most recent discoveries, and one hopes to see it in print for many years to come.

18 SIG (third edition) 656, lines 19–27; Westall 2015: pp. 28–29.

19 Whitby/Whitby 1989: p. 35.

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