

The Making of Saints in Late Antique North Africa, edited by S. Panzram and N. Klinck

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The Making of Saints in Late Antique North Africa serves to update scholars' current understanding on the formation of saints in North Africa during the latter part of the Early Church in the Late Antiquity period (roughly 313–476 CE).

The book emerged from the discovery of the remains of saints in the late fourth century CE and developed into investigations of the processes adopted in the construction of sainthood derived from the cult of martyrs. Recent research has involved the social sciences in the ongoing construction of “living texts” as expressions of cultural trauma and memory.

The Prologue considers the relationship between telling the story and the architectural context and the early transmission and formation of martyr narratives as living texts. This is followed by Part 1 which is devoted to the question “The story made the martyr?” with contributions on the “making of female martyrs”; the “military saints”; the “passion of the Martyrs of Abitinae” and the role played by significant lay persons; and the formation of the cult of a saint in the time of Augustine, the bishop of Hippo.

Part 2 on “Saints and the city – the architectural staging” focuses on the “military saints and their cults”; the “new views on the episcopate of African cities during Late Antiquity”; the role of “architectural, textual and visual aspects in the making of martyr shrines”; and the “bonding experiences between saints joining past and present in Byzantine North Africa”.

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The Epilogue concludes the book by examining the “cultural trauma and memory of the martyrs in Vandal North Africa”.

One of the benefits of this novel approach to the history of early Christianity, and other periods and eras, is that the move from dealing simply with “facts” and events is the extension of the method to include more diverse forms of evidence which contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the “spirit of the times” under investigation. Here, readers note the progress of how the role of narrative and architectural staging combine to achieve an understanding of the growth of the cult of martyrs “in agnostic terms” (p. 21). Readers note the regular editing of texts in their performance which goes beyond the simplistic dating of “original” texts.

Further, the texts are altered in transmission even as they are used in the public veneration of saints; in this they can no longer be considered “original” texts in the traditional manner. Rather, they focus on the memory of martyrs in early Christianity and here readers may access the agendas at play, active suspicions and expectations. As it happened, collective Christian memory was the fluid product of the religious suffering of others during the period of the persecution and was formative of Christian identity. This has become a model for other periods of Christian history where the myth of the martyr has strengthened religious affiliation which has, in turn, been used as a tool in the resistance of foreign domination.

Although this is a specialised book, it contains many insights which may enhance readers’ understanding of the early history of Christianity and, as such, it is to be commended.