

WRITING 'TRUE STORIES'

CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN LATE  
ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

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VOLUME 9

WRITING 'TRUE STORIES'  
Historians and Hagiographers  
in the Late Antique and Medieval Near East

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BREPOLS

One striking feature to a historian of the Latin West of the texts discussed here is that so many of them emanate from minority and persecuted groups. There is clearly a link between these minority texts and the promotion of martyrs, as the voice of resistance. This also sets them apart from the Western tradition. Anglo-Saxon texts, for example, rarely explicitly criticize ruling kings and represent the dominant discourse. Bede's voice is an authoritative one, allied to royal and high ecclesiastical power. His criticisms of contemporary kings are implicit, an unspoken subtext. But the papers in this volume frequently explore dissenting texts, texts which were created to empower minorities and to legitimate their struggles. Babai the Great claimed to use the autobiographical prison diary of the martyr George. I was reminded here of the polemical texts produced by Maximus the Confessor and his followers after his trial and exile by the Byzantine emperor, a polemical dossier circulated for propaganda purposes. These are also highly personal accounts by his disciples of their sufferings.<sup>20</sup> Is there any connection here between the confident assertion of the self in the mode of autobiography and the dissenting voice? Did the diversity and sophistication of Eastern literary culture foster a more independent discourse than in the West, where textual culture seems to have been closely allied to the structures of power?

Bede's 'principles of true history' referred not to post-Enlightenment notions of scientific accuracy and objective truth but to what was commonly believed. 'What mattered was the message of the narrative, not its details. If details were corrected for their own sake and thus made strange to the audience, then nothing might be gained and everything lost, since the narrative might lose verisimilitude and become rhetorically ineffective.'<sup>21</sup> The true stories told in the different narratives explored in this volume all possessed this powerful, higher truth: they resonated with their audiences and could be used to explore and symbolize the needs of these communities.

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<sup>20</sup> *Maximus the Confessor and his Companions*, ed. and trans. by Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Ray, 'Bede, the Exegete', pp. 129–30.

## EARLY BYZANTINE HISTORIOGRAPHY AND HAGIOGRAPHY AS DIFFERENT MODES OF CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

Derek Krueger

From the perspective of the modern critic, concerned with the classifications of texts, late ancient and early Byzantine ecclesiastical histories and saints' *Lives* belong to different genres. Ancient readers also consistently classified these texts as separate literary types even as their genres were merely emerging.<sup>1</sup> The works prompted different expectations about what the reader would and should encounter within and demanded different sorts of literary performances on the part of their authors. The division, however, was neither entirely consistent nor simultaneous. Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–339/40) most likely wrote his *Ecclesiastical History* in the 310s, before the genre of Christian hagiography existed as such, and devoted his sixth book to an extensive biography of Origen.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the slow emergence of the genre of hagiography, see Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), especially pp. 4–6, 195–97; some of my conclusions are encapsulated in Derek Krueger, 'Literary Composition and Monastic Practice in Early Byzantium: On Genre and Discipline', in *Monastères, images, pouvoirs et société à Byzance*, ed. by Michel Kaplan, *Byzantina Sorbonensia*, 23 (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2006), pp. 43–47. See also Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 19–24.

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. by Kirsopp Lake and John E. L. Oulton, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1926–32). On the date, see Richard Burgess, 'The Dates and Editions of Eusebius' *Chronici canones* and *Historia ecclesiastica*', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 48 (1997), 471–504, who has rejected a date in the 290s argued by Timothy Barnes, 'The Editions of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 21 (1980), 191–201. On

And the genre hagiography was slow to emerge. Early saints' *Lives* such as Athanasius's *Life of Antony* and Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina* present themselves as letters.<sup>3</sup> Only when we get to Theodoret of Cyrrhus (c. 339–c. 466) in the 440s does a Christian writer begin to think and write explicitly of 'the Lives of the Saints' as a new and distinct Christian genre.<sup>4</sup>

The critic's and reader's perspective on genre may tend to focus attention on the classification of the finished text in order to know what to expect from its contents or, perhaps, to know on what shelf to place it within a library. An author's perspective on genre functions differently, guiding the process of literary composition. In *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* I argued that the genre hagiography in particular prompted new ways for Christians to think about authorship, spawning new performances of authorial voice in which the narrating self strove to imitate both the style and texture of biblical narrative and the patterns of virtue exhibited by the saint extolled within the text. Distinct authorial subjectivities emerged in the prologues and epilogues of saints' *Lives* as early Byzantine writers reflected on their acts of literary production, their work as authors, within a new economy of sanctity that promoted humility and obedience.

Recognizing this new Christian literary praxis also raises questions of whether the models for authorship that emerge in early Byzantine hagiography are also found in early Byzantine historiography and of the extent to which different modes of authorial display mark hagiography and historiography not only as different genres but as different modes of Christian practice. Theodoret saturates his *Religious History* with biblical quotations and with comparisons between local ascetics

the *Life of Origen*, see Patricia Cox Miller, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983). For perspective on the development of historical writing more generally, see David Rohrbacher, *The Historians of Late Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, prol. 4, in *Athanasie d'Alexandrie: Vie d'Antoine*, ed. by Gerhardus J. M. Bartelink, Sources chrétiennes, 400 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1994). Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*, prol. 1, in *Grégoire de Nyssa: Vie de Sainte Macrine*, ed. by Pierre Maraval, Sources chrétiennes, 178 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971). See also Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, pp. 115–18.

<sup>4</sup> Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Religious History*, prol. 2–3, in *Théodoret de Cyr: Histoire des moines de Syrie*, ed. by Pierre Canivet and Alice Leroy-Molinghen, Sources chrétiennes, 234 and 257 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1977–79). See also Theodoret, *Epistle*, 82; *Théodoret de Cyr: Correspondance*, ed. by Yvan Y. Azéma, Sources chrétiennes, 98 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1964). Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, pp. 196–97.

and biblical heroes. He compares James of Cyrrhestica and Symeon the Stylite, in particular, with a multiplicity of separate biblical types. He also compares his composition of saints' *Lives* with Moses' 'writing down the way of life of the holy men of old' (I.1) and compares his research methods with those of the gospel writers, some of whom wrote as eyewitnesses (Luke and John), while other wrote relying on oral testimony (Matthew and Mark) (prol. 11). Theodoret thus anchors his heroes and his own authorial practice in biblical types.

Authorial performances of humility and obedience in particular mark the early Byzantine hagiographer as an emulator of the saints he describes. Authorial claims to be inadequate to the task of composition, to be 'witless and unskilled [ιδιώτης]';<sup>5</sup> or to write 'without ignorance of my own unworthiness and deficient education';<sup>6</sup> cast the work of composition within the framework of the virtue humility, so that authors imitate the saints.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the frequent quotation of the phrase 'witless and unskilled' ties the author to the humility of the apostles as described in Acts 4. 13: 'Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and unskilled men [ἄνεθροποι ἀγράμματοι εἰσιν καὶ ιδιώται], they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus.' In some texts, statements that the author writes only in obedience to the demands of a superior or a community situate hagiographical composition within the parameters of the monastic life, and, in fact, also claim the Evangelists as models, since according to late ancient Christian lore, the gossellers only wrote in response to the demands of others.<sup>8</sup>

While similar techniques are not entirely lacking in ecclesiastical historiography, examination of the prologues and epilogues of late ancient church historians and their employment of biblical citations reveals that authorial self-presentation in historiography did not involve these most typical conventions of the emerging genre of hagiography. I briefly consider here the ecclesiastical histories of Eusebius, Socrates (c. 380–after 439), Sozomen (c. 400–c. 450?), Theodoret, and Evagrius of Antioch (c. 536–after 594). Together these authors produced

<sup>5</sup> *Life of Daniel the Stylite*, 1, in *Les saints stylites*, ed. by Hippolyte Delehaye, Subsidia hagiographica, 14 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1923), pp. 1–94.

<sup>6</sup> Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Sabas*, in *Kyrrillos von Skythopolis*, ed. by Eduard Schwartz, *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, 49. 2 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1939), pp. 85–200 (p. 86).

<sup>7</sup> Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, pp. 94–109.

<sup>8</sup> On the Evangelists and models for authorship, see Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, pp. 33–62.

a continuous and often overlapping narrative of Christianity's history from the perspective of Greek-speaking church authorities. With his supplementary chapters, Eusebius covered the period from the origins of Christianity to 324. Socrates', Sozomen's, and Theodoret's accounts each continued where Eusebius had left off. Socrates dealt with the years from 305 to 439, while Sozomen's account covers from 324 to 425 — the final part of his ninth book, which has been lost, extended to 439. Theodoret started in 323 and ended in 428; Evagrius continued with an account of the period from 431 to 594.<sup>9</sup>

In comparison with saints' *Lives*, Socrates, Sozomen, and Evagrius of Antioch employ few biblical citations, even while their historical analyses are undergirded by theological expectations about the work of God in history. Their texts do not intend to participate in and extend the world of the Bible into the era they describe. Theodoret is a particularly useful case, since he wrote in both genres. A comparison of his *Religious History* and his *Ecclesiastical History* reveals that although his *Ecclesiastical History* does use more biblical quotations than Socrates and Sozomen, it uses far fewer biblical tags than the *Religious History*, suggesting that he understood himself to be writing in a different mode. In a few cases, Theodoret treats the same figures in both works: the re-narration in the *Ecclesiastical History* of the deeds of James of Nisibis (II.30), Julian Saba, Aphrahat, and Madedonius lack the persistent typological themes of their accounts in the *Religious History*. The editors of the Nicene- and Post-Nicene Fathers' translation of Socrates cite relatively few biblical tags and quotations, mostly in quotations of other authors. Their index to Sozomen (II.2.455) cites a mere sixteen biblical citations in the entire work, a quarter of them in the introductory chapter.

Statements of authorial humility in Christian literature predate their use as ascetic *topoi* in hagiography. A passage from the first chapter of the first book of

<sup>9</sup> Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. by Günther C. Hansen, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller*, n.s., 1 (Berlin: Akademie, 1995); trans. in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 14 vols (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), II, 1–178. Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. by Joseph Bidez, rev. edn ed. by Günther C. Hansen, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller*, n.s., 4 (Berlin: Akademie, 1995); trans. in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, II, 179–427. Theodoret of Cyrillus, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. by Léon Parmentier and Felix Scheidweiler, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller*, 44 (Berlin: Akademie, 1954); trans. in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, III, 33–159. Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. by Joseph Bidez and Léon Parmentier (London: Methuen, 1898); *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus*, trans. by Michael Whitby, *Translated Texts for Historians*, 33 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).

Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* displays both a declaration of the author's limitations and a prayer for God's assistance:

I trust that kindly disposed readers will pardon the deficiencies of the work, for I confess that my powers are inadequate to do full justice to so ambitious an undertaking. I am the first to venture on such a project and to set out on what is indeed a lonely and untrodden path; but I pray that I may have God to guide me and the power of the Lord to assist me.<sup>10</sup>

Consciously setting out to write in a new genre, Eusebius has already Christianized earlier Greco-Roman conventions for protestations of authorial modesty and the occasional invocation of the muse. While such textual performances of humility and dependence on divine assistance would, in time, become key elements of hagiographical front and back matter, they did not become standard among Eusebius's three continuators who composed in the 440s and 450s. In the opening of his *Ecclesiastical History*, Socrates Scholasticus explicitly situates his work as a continuation and expansion of Eusebius's 'history of the church in ten books' and *Life of Constantine*, but he eschews imitation of Eusebius's claims of inadequacy and prayer for God's help.<sup>11</sup> Instead, his description of his sources — 'what we have been able to collect from documents, and what we have heard from those who were familiar with the facts' (I.1) — employs a trope of self-positioning comparing his methods to the various methods attributed by late ancient Christian readers to the New Testament Evangelists, especially Luke.<sup>12</sup> Socrates presents himself and his text as revising parts of Eusebius's narrative that need correction. He uses his prologue to establish rather than undermine his authority through a performance of humility. The trope of carefully researched history recurs at the beginning of Socrates' second book, where he presents his work as a correction of Rufinus's continuation of Eusebius, both with respect to chronology and the examination of additional sources, including the writings of Athanasius and 'several letters of eminent persons' (II.1).

While Socrates does not present his act of authorship as a performance of asceticism, he does understand historical investigation as a theological discourse. At the opening of Book V, Socrates apologizes to the reader for mixing wars

<sup>10</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.1; Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, trans. by Geoffrey A. Williamson (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> On the text more generally, see Theresa Urbainczyk, *Socrates of Constantinople: Historian of Church and State* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> See Luke 1. 1–4. For the significance of Luke's model of careful research and sifting of sources for subsequent Christian authors' self-presentation, see Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, pp. 29, 33–35, 42–46.

and political history into his history of the church but offers that the 'mischiefs of the state and the troubles of the Church have been inseparably connected' (V.1); he proposes that current problems of imperial crisis and the spread of heresy are chastisement for sin. At the opening of the sixth book, Socrates remarks on his style 'divested indeed of all the affectation of sublimity', not to connect it with the simple speech of the apostles, as a hagiographer might, but rather to explain that he was gauging his rhetoric to his audience (VI.1).

The *Ecclesiastical History* of Sozomen, by contrast, opens with the author's reflection on the huge scale of the task. He reasons that if 'so divine and marvellous a change has taken place' in the demise of paganism, 'why should not I rise above myself and write a history of the Church?' He concludes his introduction 'invoking the help and propitiousness of God' (I.1). The text lacks any attempt to link this cursory suffrage to broader patterns of prayer, and while possibly modest, Sozomen's self-presentation involves no sort of self-abasement. Sozomen is emulating earlier historians, not emulating the saints.

The introduction to Theodoret's *Ecclesiastical History* is brief, with a few sentences comparing writing and painting in which 'historians substitute books for pictures'. This recalls the much more elaborate discussion of sculpture and hagiography in his earlier *Religious History*. And he includes a statement of authorial humility, although it lacks explicitly ascetic vocabulary: 'When I compare my own powers with the magnitude of the undertaking, I shrink from attempting it. Trusting, however, in the bounty of the Giver of all good, I enter upon a task beyond my own strength' (prol. 1). Theodoret does claim that he was 'frequently urged by friends' to write the *Ecclesiastical History*, employing a topos found in early Byzantine discussions of why the Evangelists wrote the Gospels.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Theodoret does not here employ his hagiographical guise.

Evagrius Scholasticus's *Ecclesiastical History*, completed in 593/94, consciously followed in the steps of the four earlier church historians.<sup>14</sup> Here for the first time — and some 150 years after the previous three authors — we also

<sup>13</sup> For the Evangelists as reluctant writers, see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, II.15, III.24. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, 1. 3, in *Patrologiae cursus completus [...] Series Graeca*, ed. by Jacques-Paul Migne, 161 vols (Paris: Migne, 1857–66), LVII, cols 13–472, LVIII, cols 471–794 (here LVII, col. 17); Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion*, 51.12.2; Epiphanius, *Bände 1–3: Ancoratus und Panarion*, ed. by Karl Holl and Jürgen Dummer, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller*, 25, 31, 37 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1915–33). See also Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography*, v.190, 196, 198, 202, in *Cosmas Indicopleustes: Topographie chrétienne*, ed. by Wanda Wolska-Conus, *Sources chrétiennes*, 141, 159, 197 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968–73).

<sup>14</sup> *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. by Whitby, pp. xx, lv–lx.

see the influence of hagiographical models for authorial asceticism in the historian's self-presentation. In his opening paragraph, after citing the works of Eusebius, Sozomen, Theodoret, and Socrates, Evagrius explains that he had taken in hand to describe more recent events, although he has not 'obtained any sort of sequential account' (I.5). In this manner, he confesses that he has failed to produce a narrative on the model of the author of the New Testament books of Luke and Acts who claimed that he had produced an 'orderly account [ἀκριβῶς καθεξῆς]' so that his reader 'may know the truth concerning the things of which [he has] been informed' (Luke 1. 1–4). Evagrius identifies not with Luke but with the much humbler apostles. He writes 'even though I am not expert in such matters, and undertake to labour for their sake and to make these into an account, putting full trust in Him who both gave wisdom to fisherman and changed an unreasoning tongue into articulate eloquence' (I.5). In addition to the conventional historian's claim to 'lack of literary competence',<sup>15</sup> Evagrius allies himself with the disciples, simple men who were granted the ability to speak well and wisely by the inspiration of the holy spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2. 1–4. That said, Evagrius avoids further tropes typical of authorial self-denigration in hagiography.

In general, the authorial voices present in the prologues of ecclesiastical histories adopt subjectivities different from those developing in hagiography. On the one hand, the general lack of certain hagiographical tropes in ecclesiastical histories, such as biblical tags and performances of humility, serves as a control, confirming the novelty of hagiographical performances of authorship. On the other hand, the appearance of other Christian tropes, or the Christianization of older historiographical tropes, suggests that ecclesiastical history also prompted a distinct, if different, mode of Christian literary practice. This mode rested on the authority of research methods and the claim to stand in relationship to earlier historiographical texts. The persona of the ecclesiastical historian was also a Christian type.

Some of the differences in the authorial voices present in late ancient and early Byzantine hagiography and ecclesiastical history no doubt derive from the varied contexts in which their texts were read and heard. At present we know too little about the performance contexts for both incipient genres. It seems most likely that hagiography reached a wider audience, including significant numbers of uneducated and lay Christians, especially when texts were read at shrines or in paraliturgical services on the anniversaries of saints' deaths. Ecclesiastical history, on the other hand, aimed for smaller, private reading contexts, in the homes of

<sup>15</sup> *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. by Whitby, p. 5 n. 4.

educated lay Christians, or perhaps to groups of elite churchmen.<sup>16</sup> The authorial performance of the hagiographer thus keyed itself to the display of saintly virtues, while the authorial voice of the church historian strove to display a command of the sources and the shape of the narrative.

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## CREATING LOCAL HISTORY: COPTIC ENCOMIA CELEBRATING PAST EVENTS

Gesa Schenke

Among the numerous Coptic hagiographical texts, there are many encomia concerning the life and afterlife of famous martyr saints. These festive orations, presented to a congregation gathered at the martyr's shrine on the day of his/her feast, are designed not only to invoke a sense of pride in the Christian faith and history but also to inspire the audience into leading a rewarding and virtuous Christian life themselves. They honour and celebrate a local Christian hero while offering a short history of past events.

In this paper, I wish to explore the nature of these encomia, which essentially seem to present a perfectly interwoven mixture of history and hagiography. In doing so, I shall look at five different encomia, all presented to famous martyr saints by men of the highest standing: the encomium for Apa Mena attributed to John, Archbishop of Alexandria,<sup>1</sup> the encomium for Saint Kollouthos attributed to Bishop Isaac of Antinoe,<sup>2</sup> the encomium on Saint Merkourios the General attributed to Basil of Caesarea,<sup>3</sup> the encomium for Saint Theodore the Stratelates

<sup>1</sup> *Apa Mena: A Selection of Coptic Texts Relating to St. Menas*, ed. and trans. by James Drescher, *Textes et documents* (Cairo: Société d'archéologie copte, 1946), pp. 35–72 (text) and 128–49 (trans.).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen E. Thompson, 'Encomium on St Coluthus Attributed to Isaac of Antinoe', in *Encomiastica from the Pierpont Morgan Library: Five Coptic Homilies Attributed to Anastasius of Euchaita, Epiphanius of Salamis, Isaac of Antinoe, Severian of Gabala, and Theopempus of Antioch*, ed. by Leo Depuydt, CSCO, 544–45, *Scriptores coptici* (hereafter scr. copt.), 47–48 (text and translation volumes respectively) (1993), pp. 47–83 (text) and pp. 37–64 (trans.).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Frederick Weidmann, 'Encomium on St Mercurius the General Attributed to Basil of Caesarea', in *Homiletica from the Pierpont Morgan Library: Seven Coptic Homilies Attributed to*

<sup>16</sup> My remarks on audience are speculative and preliminary, although, I think, not unfounded. Further research on the relationship between expected audiences and the formation of various Christian literary genres would be most welcome.