



Book Review — *Syrian Stylites: Rereadings and Recastings of Late Ancient Superheroes*, edited by Barbara Crostini and Christian Høgel.

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Modern stylite studies rest on a nucleus of Greek and Syriac *Lives*, but Crostini and Høgel, building on a 2019 workshop in Istanbul, expand this diachronic field by gathering essays into an anthology. Rather than offering a life of Symeon, they chart reception and fascination, tracing how the pillar saint has been reread and reimagined across centuries and geographies. Their premise is that a solitary hermit balanced on a column is an adaptable motif. His vertical ascent may suggest transcendence, but it is his horizontal migrations that truly re-casts him as a mythical “super-hero”, elevating him beyond his modest Syrian origins. The volume suggests the stylite as a visual beacon, an ontological motif that re-adapts pagan spectacle and invites both re-enchantment as well as occasional pejorative reception from those engaged with him.

Stylite scholarship, we are reminded, blossoms whenever new translations appear: the availability of the *Lives* in multiple languages both attests to a fascination stretching well beyond late antiquity and provides prime material for a growing field of academic interest. Translation, therefore, functions as a generative principle. Stylite narratives’ meanings shift nuances when read in English, Italian, Arabic or other languages; each translation opens the canon to new audiences and prompts reinterpretation. Situated at the forefront of this evolving scholarship, *Syrian Stylites* self-consciously incorporates multi-disciplinary contributions and voices, enlivening reception beyond a static moment but as an ongoing *process*.

The book is divided into three sections, with thirteen chapters. Part I (*Textual Reception: Stylites and Their Texts*) discusses literary portrayals of stylites. Andreas Westergren explains the volume’s interesting subheading, reading the first stylite biography as a paradoxical myth,

Charles Kuper analyses parody and imitation in the *Life of Theodulus the Stylite*, Barbara Crostini discusses necrophilia themes in Antonios' *Life of St Symeon the Stylite*, Thomas Arentzen studies depictions of pillars and shadows, Christian Høgel evaluates stylites in the Byzantine *Metaphrastic Menologion* and Béatrice Caseau, with Charis Messis, explores the novelistic *Life of Theodore of Edessa*. Fabrizio Conca and Laura Franco close the section with a study of modern poetry about Symeon that compares Alfred Tennyson, Giuseppe Nencioni and Constantine Kavafis. In this section we grapple first with what it is that we think we know, based on our literary artefacts. What do we know of the culture, the languages and the societies? How do we receive, interpret, or trust what we are given?

Part II ("*Visual Reception: Stylites and Their Images*") turns to material and visual culture. Esen Ögüş traces how late antique audiences viewed the figure on a pillar and the cultural stimulation of a human figure elevated above the ground. Tiffany Apostolou juxtaposes stylite portraiture with contemporary art, reading the column as frame and support and noting how artists subvert the classical pillar. Basema Hamarneh examines archaeological remains of stylite towers in the Levant, providing measurements of the tiny rooms and noting that these structures sheltered monks and even reclusive women. Maria Raffaella Menna studies the stylites of Cappadocia, showing how natural rock cones functioned as stylite stone reliquaries. Maria Veronese analyses Luis Buñuel's film *Simón del Desierto* and Christine Amadou reflects on performance and reclusion. This section moves our enquiry on reception to the depths of symbolism. What might material artefact *signify*? What does it communicate beyond itself?

Part III presents a short anthology of images and poems about stylites and includes Charles Lock's translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's poem '*Der Styлит*'. This section, by contrasting visual materials with poetry, draws the reader into the imaginative reception of pillar saints, providing a creative counterpoint that exemplifies that reception is as much a creative process as a purely analytical one.

Methodologically, *Syrian Stylites*'s cross-disciplinary voices collaborate to map the stylite's 'afterlives', elevating their historical negative space. The pillar saint is treated as a placeholder for inquiry, a stand-in iconic performer, whose vertical ascent structures ineffable space and whose

horizontal diffusion allows us to better map the perimeter formed by the imprints that surround him; what might this stylite shaped motif tell us, if anything, about the context it emerged from?

The volume treats the amorphous topology of the pillar saint through its scholarly erudition, interweaving these threads of nuance through its collation of multifaceted responses. The volume's strengths lie in this breadth, interdisciplinarity and reflective stance. Essays are authored by specialists in diverse disciplines from philological and archaeological approaches to film studies. The cross-media framing allows the stylite to be understood as both ascetic figure and symbol. In synthesising Greek and Syriac texts with modern translations, the book foregrounds the politics of reception and the role of translation as a catalyst. It demonstrates how vertical and horizontal axes generate a liminal space that is both metaphysical and material, inviting readers to contemplate how our methods may shape the figures we study.

Conceived as a by-product of a scholarly workshop, there is a real sense of intentionality in the volume's conversational conviviality. The workshop origins, however, do produce a degree of unevenness. Essays noticeably vary in depth and the absence of a synthesising conclusion may disorient those searching for solid ground as well as frustrate those looking for closure. Those expecting a linear, thorough and deep 350-page biography of the life of Symeon may be disappointed; this is a compendium of readings, re-readings, ideas, critiques, inversions and myths, suited to readers who embrace ambiguity. The collection rewards specialists in classics, late antiquity, reception theory, religious studies and art history. It will deeply enrich the academic understanding of those studying any single period of stylite history, while those in translation studies are sure to appreciate its centralising of nuance and its mistrust of myopic interpretation.

Syrian Stylites avoids drawing firm conclusions. The book invites us to walk through a museum of texts and objects, to wander between asceticism and art. Its structure walks the reader through a practical ladder of interpretation, literary analysis, symbolism and internalised imaginal reception. It cautions against both positivism and reductionism and reminds us that the importance of an artefact is proportional to our willingness to engage in the creation and revision of meaning making. For readers

prepared to engage with complexity, this book encourages us to rethink how we research, read, see and imagine the past and to recognise that ambiguous motifs, when viewed through multiple lenses, can enliven the dynamic interplay between the known and the unknown.

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