

## BOOK REVIEW AND NOTE

***The Manichaeans of the Roman East: Manichaeism in Greek Anti-Manichaica and Roman Imperial Legislation.* By Rea Matsangou. Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 105. Leiden: Brill, 2023. xxii + 580 pp. \$179.00 hardback.**

Matsangou's book is a lightly revised version of a doctoral dissertation completed at Leiden University in 2021. It aims to provide an overview of anti-Manichaean works written in Greek between the fourth and sixth centuries AD and to show that these works can contribute to our understanding of lived religion in the late antique world.

In the introduction and chapter 1, Matsangou argues that academic research on Manichaeism has tended to dismiss the usefulness of Greek anti-Manichaean sources in reconstructing the beliefs and practices of Manichaean communities in the eastern Mediterranean. She argues, to the contrary, that Greek anti-Manichaean works made use of Manichaean texts and can allow one to recover crucial historical details about Manichaean missionary expansion in the Greek East. The author therefore aims to reconstruct "the most comprehensive picture of what Manichaeism meant for a citizen of the Roman Empire" in late antiquity, setting aside questions about how anti-Manichaean works were composed or "how the polemical argumentation of the anti-Manichaean authors was developed" (32).

Matsangou views some anti-Manichaean works as more useful to her purposes than others, focusing especially on the early fourth-century *Acta Archelai* (hereafter, *AA*) and an anonymous sixth-century abjuration formula, the *Seven Chapters*. Some attention is also given to works by other fourth-century writers (Alexander of Lycopolis, Cyril of Jerusalem, Titus of Bostra, and John Chrysostom). Relatively little use is made of anti-Manichaean works from the early sixth century (Simplicius, John the Grammarian, Zacharias of Mitylene, and Paul the Persian).

In chapter 2, Matsangou argues that the *AA* can provide important information about the early history of the Manichaean missionary movement. This is a potentially controversial claim, since the *AA* is a fictional narrative that conforms to some of the conventions of the Greek novel and makes polemical assertions about Mani's life that have no historical basis. Matsangou is willing to concede that the *AA* is a fictional narrative but argues that it was constructed out of information derived from Manichaean sources. She argues that wherever the *AA* offers information that can be paralleled in Manichaean texts (e.g., regarding the books of the Manichaean canon, the grades of the Manichaean hierarchy, or the names of the first Manichaean missionaries), one may assume that a Manichaean source is being used. Thus, "in the *AA* we find reflections of actual Manichaean narratives of the life of" Mani (83 n.75), which reflect "Mani's own activity" (132) and "true events of Mani's life" (150). The public disputations narrated in the *AA* can therefore be treated as consistent with historical events (138) and allow one to recover specific information about actual debates (141–142), including "accurate information concerning the protocol of the debates and Mani's statements during the debates" (152). Thus, "if we remove the part of

fiction. . . even fictional stories may reflect facts” (139–140), since the AA uses “a fiction in order to narrate facts” (141). The text of the AA is thus like a window; once a few basic criteria are met, it is assumed that one can look behind the text and gaze back upon the past in a relatively unmediated way.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine Roman imperial legislation against Manichaeism from the fourth century to the early sixth century. Matsangou argues that Roman law regarded Manichaeism not as a Christian sect whose leaders held to incorrect teachings, but rather as an independent religion, i.e. a non-traditional cult whose gatherings and ritual practices were socially disruptive and a threat to the public order.

Chapter 5 examines what Greek anti-Manichaean sources can contribute to the reconstruction of Manichaean religious practice. Matsangou concludes that Greek anti-Manichaean works are helpful in reconstructing certain aspects of the Manichaean cosmological myth but show little interest in Manichaean rituals and the internal life of the Manichaean community.

Chapter 6 tries to determine which contemporary social groups were most attracted to Manichaeism. Matsangou argues, on thin evidence, that younger, socially disaffected persons who valued asceticism and a peripatetic lifestyle were most sympathetic to Manichaeism (351).

Chapter 7 examines references to persons called Manichaeans in texts from the fourth to sixth centuries. Matsangou concludes that by the sixth century Manichaeans had not only survived persecution but had become “fully integrated in society, holding public offices in the state’s civil and military structure” (205; cf. 509). She even considers it “plausible that there was a club of Manichaean women in [the] Byzantine aristocracy ... under the patronage of Empress Theodora” (449; cf. 453).

In chapter 8 Matsangou argues that systematic persecution under Justinian finally destroyed Manichaeans’ public networks and institutional life, although informal local networks of persons who endorsed Manichaean beliefs and practices (“crypto-Manichaeans”) may have survived into the modern period (490–491).

The book contains relatively few typographical errors: “edition princeps” (4 n.16), “Nilus of Ankara” (*passim*), “nor anything in their works indicates” (53), “*Fifteenth Epistles to the Laodiceans*” (107), “Cabriabios” (130), “satisfied up” (290), “(fabricatrici- cis)” (314); “PRynalds” (326 n.309). There are, however, some translations that might be reconsidered. In *Acta Archelai* 66.3–4 *medicamentis infectam* should not be translated “infused with drugs” (76), but rather “colored with dyes”; see Michael Lapidge, *The Roman Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 616 with n.27. In Cyril, *Catech.* 6.33, ἰσχῶς does not mean “dried fig” (297), but rather “spurge” (*Euphorbia apios*), a plant that was used as a purgative and in magical rituals. The phrase “into which they dip the spurge” refers to dipping the cut stems of the spurge into boiling water to stop the flow of toxic milky sap, a task that had to be completed before the spurge could be laid on the altar.

Matsangou’s book provides a useful introduction to Greek anti-Manichaean literature. To justify some of her conclusions, the author would need to develop a clearer account of the relationship between narrative representation and historical events.

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