

**BOOK REVIEW AND NOTE**

***Early Christianity in Macedonia: From Paul to the Late Sixth Century.*** By **Julien M. Ogereau.** Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, Vol. 119, Early Christianity in Greece, Vol. 2. Leiden: Brill, 2024. xix + 446 pp. \$150.

In the classical Greek world the kingdom of Macedonia was dismissed as peripheral and under-civilized. But as a Roman province Macedonia became a strategic intersection, connecting the Balkan regions with the Aegean Sea but also located near the linguistic fault line between Greek and Latin, the political division between eastern and western emperors, and eventually the religious confrontation between popes at Rome and patriarchs at Constantinople. The province was about midway on the Via Egnatia, the old highway connecting Dyrrhacium (modern Durrës) on the Adriatic Sea with Byzantium (Constantinople) that was a major conduit between Italy and Asia Minor. In the mid-first century one celebrated visitor was the apostle Paul.

In the early Christian world the claim of an apostolic heritage elevated the prestige of regions and cities. At Philippi, where Paul spent a night in jail, an epitaph could announce that 500 years later the church was still “proud of its apostolic bonds in Christ” (124–125). But despite this long pedigree, literary sources for the expansion and development of Christianity in Macedonia after the early second century are scarce. The solution is the use of material culture, and Julien Ogereau has now splendidly compensated for the void by looking to archaeology and, especially, epigraphy.

Throughout Macedonia hundreds of late antique and Byzantine churches have been discovered (even if not yet all have been properly excavated). From the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries there are about 500 Christian inscriptions, including about 160 from Thessalonica alone, most in Greek but a few in Latin. Epitaphs predominate by far, along with votives, invocations, and building dedications. As many of the inscriptions were published over 40 years ago by Denis Feissel in a fundamental collection, Ogereau has recognized that their deployment is long overdue. “With respect to Macedonian Christianity, inscriptions constitute our most abundant, and thus principal, source of information in the post-Constantinian era” (12). Ogereau’s meticulous overviews are very valuable for integrating the scattered archaeological reports of excavations, consolidating the equally dispersed editions and commentaries on inscriptions, and adding reconstructions, diagrams, maps, and excellent photographs of ruined churches, inscriptions, and mosaic floors. While acknowledging that brief inscriptions can provide only “dim light” (102), his discussions are still ambitious enough to generate a broad synthesis. This is a solidly impressive book.

The first three chapters provide historical background and a summary of scholarship on Paul’s activities in Macedonia. The primary sources are Paul’s own letters to the Christian communities at Philippi and Thessalonica, supplemented by the “clichéd anecdotes of questionable historical value” (78) in chapters 16 and 17 of Acts of the Apostles. Another important literary source is the letter of Polycarp of Smyrna in the early second century, encouraging the community at Philippi to preserve the teachings

of Paul's letters. The memory of Paul may indeed have survived in a local cult, and in the mid-fourth century an inscription at Philippi celebrated "the basilica of Paul" (106–108). Ogereau suggests that Philippi may have become a destination for pilgrims following the footsteps of Paul (138, 161).

The next four chapters methodically summarize the available archaeological and epigraphical evidence in, respectively, eastern, central, western, and northern Macedonia. Ogereau's survey is eyeopening precisely because it is so comprehensive and so careful. The small details suggest many possibilities for modifying our thinking about monumental architecture and popular theology. By the sixth century the number of churches in some cities "appears to have exceeded the liturgical needs of the local population" (138, 161). At Thessalonica the church dedicated to St. Demetrius was impressive enough that even the emperor Justinian paid his respects to the "revered house" (183). At Stobi side-by-side churches might have accommodated different theological factions (308). At Beroea an epitaph mentioned an "eternal virgin," who had perhaps headed a convent (254–255). Especially tantalizing are the offhand phrases in inscriptions. A reference to "great Christ" was unique to Macedonia (238), but description as a *Christianos* was rare (172). Epitaphs seemed to preserve the voices of ordinary Christians, such as the doctor who invoked Jesus Christ as "God who created being from non-being" (118–119), or the archivist who was blissfully sleeping in his tomb while "waiting for the parousia with the entire world" (313).

In fact, the Avars and Slavs showed up first, and from the later sixth century cities declined. Some of the interior cities were abandoned (159, 252, 261), and some churches were looted (224). At Amphipolis the construction of a new fortification wall even separated a church from its courtyard: "Christianity. . . slowly withered away in the early Byzantine period" (151). Thessalonica may have survived as a Byzantine fortress under the protection of St. Demetrius, but in parts of Macedonia Christianity would need to be introduced again by new apostles.

Ogereau's book is the latest in the series "Early Christianity in Greece," which already includes a volume on Athens and Attica. A companion series "Early Christianity in Asia Minor" includes volumes on Phrygia, the Lycus valley in southern Phrygia, Lycaonia, and Cyprus. These are uniformly excellent books that demonstrate the value of incorporating inscriptions and archaeology into modern narratives. Ogereau's book is furthermore another tribute to the usefulness of *Inscriptiones Christianae Graecae*, the online digital collection of early Christian inscriptions from Asia Minor and Greece that offers reliable texts, translations, and commentaries.

Raymond Van Dam  
University of Michigan  
doi:10.1017/S0009640724001288