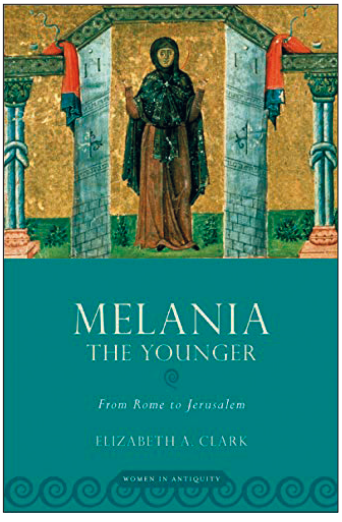
MELANIA THE YOUNGER



CLARK, ELIZABETH A. (2021). *Melania the Younger. From Rome to Jerusalem. Women in Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, xvii + 239 pp., 99,50 € [ISBN: 978-0-1908-8823-7].

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NOTWITHSTANDING THE CLARITY OF THE TITLE, THIS BOOK TELLS the story of not one but two remarkable women. Front and very much to the center, stands Melania the younger, the "fabulously wealthy" heiress of a great Roman family who, after converting to an ascetic form of Christianity, spent the rest of her life trying to give away her vast riches. And vast they were. One recent estimate calculates her annual income at over $93 million in today's currency, or a sum sufficient to support 16,800 working families for a year (p. 44). This is a transfixing story, set against the sweeping backdrop of the fall of Rome and the ascent of Constantinople, the decline of paganism and the rise of Christianity. In one way or another, Melania seems to have been connected with every powerful person of the time: Her story takes us from the halls of power (both senatorial and episcopal) to the cells of anchorites, from the luxurious, mosaic-inlaid baths of palatial villas to tiny ascetic enclosures and haircloth filled with

vermin. But behind this flamboyant story of "riches to rags" is the constant presence of the narrator: not Gerontius, the monastic author of the original *Life* – although he receives his due – but rather the magisterial presence of the late Elizabeth A. Clark. For in writing this book, she returned to her own earlier work, *The Life of Melania the Younger*, published in 1984. Embedded in the story she tells is also an account of the scholarly upheavals and advances of the last forty years and, in more muted tones, of her own centrality within the burgeoning field of early Christian studies. For it is not only Melania who appears to have known everyone who mattered. To read Clark's footnotes is to be introduced to most, if not all of the major scholarly figures of our time. Like the subject of her study, Clark was at the center of a dense and far-flung network, established and maintained by travel and the bonds of (fictive) kinship, as well as by the regular exchange of gifts, hospitality, and above all, texts.

The impulse to revisit a topic has not been much explored in academia, but the scholarly return is an intriguing phenomenon. By inviting an assessment of what has changed, it implicitly raises the question of motivation, of what prompted Clark to rethink her earlier work. She herself anticipates the question (p. 15).

The 1984 study reflected the distinctive enthusiasms of second wave feminism. Because it was designed as a retrieval and celebration of a prominent early Christian woman, the centerpiece of the book is a translation of the *Life of Melania*. An introductory chapter recounts the manuscript's discovery and weighs the priority of the Greek over the Latin recension. A commentary, addressing a number of contextual issues, follows the translation; and a final chapter, assessing the possible influence of the Hellenistic romance, rounds out the study. The question of historical reliability is very much to the fore.

In this new study, the focus has shifted. The *Life* (now translated by Theodore Papaloizos) has moved to the end, where it functions almost as an appendix. Matters relating to the manuscript tradition, historical attestation, and literary genre are dealt with quickly in a few introductory pages. The bulk of the work now centers on situating Melania's story firmly within her society. Keen to remedy what she now perceives to be an earlier oversight, Clark seizes every opportunity to connect Melania's story to larger economic and social structures. The result is extraordinary. Readers are treated to expert distillations of a wide range of complex topics: "specifics regarding property (estates and their produce, slaves, mansions, art), inheritance, and patronage; the Christianization of the empire; religious divergences, both between Christians and 'pagans' and among various Christian groups; travel, its modes and difficulties; and the development of religious and monastic life, especially in Jerusalem" (pp. 18-19). To this already impressive list, other entries could be added: literacy and education, the cult of martyrs and of relics, Marian piety, pilgrimage, legal codification and

(much) doctrinal dispute. Even if necessarily compact, the discussions are nuanced. To "deceptively simple questions", such as "What did family mean in Late Antiquity? (p. 45), or "Who was a pagan?" (p. 61), or "What did conversion mean?" (p. 68), the book offers satisfyingly complex answers. Through the lens of one, remarkable life, Clark has produced a compelling introduction to much of what we know about early Christianity within its late antique setting. She offers the study as "a rich resource for historians not only of religion but also of Roman society, culture, economy, and late-ancient power politics" (p. 198).

Fuller attention to context also reveals intriguing silences in the text. By raising these omissions into view, Clark highlights the work of Melania's original biographer. Although it is possible that Gerontius deliberately withheld information that he considered unimportant or unflattering, she suggests that it is more likely that he was simply ignorant of the events, that he joined Melania only later, after she had settled in Jerusalem (pp. 7, 84, 127, 131, 151).

The book is organized around the cities where Melania lived. And it is told very much as a story. Notwithstanding the wealth of scholarship pooled at the bottom of the page, the style is lively and accessible. We find ourselves swept up into her entourage. The fiction of a travelogue is especially apparent at the conclusion of chapters, which often end with a rousing exhortation to readers, such as "… on to North Africa, where more adventures await" (p. 113), or "To Jerusalem we go" (p. 145). Because we travel at her side, our vision is largely constrained by what Melania might have seen. The view is an aristocratic one. We become acquainted with elite privileges and amenities, and feel the thrill of being received – even courted – by powerful and erudite bishops; we even come to sympathize with the difficulties of disposing of estates that stretched over eight provinces (pp. 81, 86-88, 106-109). Occasionally, Clark widens the lens, allowing us to glimpse the throngs of mostly enslaved persons (perhaps 25,000 in all), who supported Melania's opulent lifestyle, and whose welfare and livelihood seems hardly to have figured in her equally extravagant dispersal (pp. 91-97). What we do not see, however, is the lives of the vast majority of people: We gain little sense of how the non-elite lived and worked; what they believed and how they worshipped. In this sense, the view of early Christianity remains striking partial.

Another limitation concerns the person in whose company we travel. Clark has no interest in psychological history and scant sympathy for Melania's ardent Christian beliefs. Thus, despite the richness of the study, there remains an absence at its center: Melania herself remains a cipher. Even with the abundant prosopological information, we gain little insight into her inner self – why she pursued this path. If New Testament teachings played a role (pp. 85, 122-125), why did they strike her so forcefully? The question is perhaps insoluble (p. 80), but finding an answer is a

goal that drives many historians. As for Elizabeth Clark, her sympathies are clearly more aligned with the inclinations of Melania's (reluctantly chaste) husband, Pinian, "whose ascetic life consisted of reading, gardening, and 'solemn conferences'" (p. 134), although she notes with evident approval, Melania's commitment to "intellectual activities, her reading, note-taking, and copying of Scripture" (p. 135).

Magisterial and remarkably comprehensive, the updated scholarly story also has its silences. For the heady enthusiasm of second wave recovery that fueled the publication of *The Life of Melania the Younger* cooled rapidly under the impact of critical theory. Embracing "the linguistic turn", Clark, among others, wondered audibly what historical evidence could be reliably distilled from hagiographic portraits: Was the impression of hard data in a *Life* like that of Melania, simply a literary device, a means of creating a reality effect?[1] With characteristic courage, Clark confronted this challenge in a series of often-cited publications. But of this period of theory-driven doubt, the updated study breathes not a word. Instead, it is very much the product of the last decade and a half of her career, when she turned to archival work. Immersed in the abundant (if dusty) records of early American patristic scholars, she refound her early historical certitude.

As the last major publication of a towering figure in early Christian studies, the book is not without its sober premonitions. In more than one place, as Clark traces a historical trajectory, she pauses to note that by then, Melania would be dead (pp. 145, 171). An inarguable fact, the observation nevertheless sounds a chill note, and one made yet colder by Clark's own death in September, 2021. She will not read this review; but there is comfort in knowing that her erudite words and her inspiring life live on. Like Melania, whose story she pondered not once but twice, she too has been laid to rest clothed "in the virtues she had acquired in life" (p. 238).[2] *Requiescas in pace*, revered teacher, beloved friend.

Bibliography

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1. Clark, 1998.
2. *V. Mel. Jun*. 69, trans. Papaloizos.