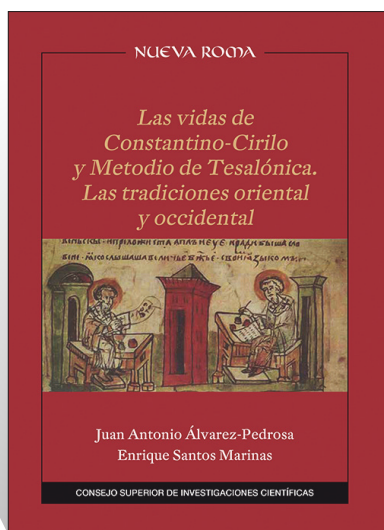


Las vidas de Constantino-Cirilio y Metodio de Tesalónica

FICHA BIBLIOGRÁFICA



JUAN ANTONIO ÁLVAREZ-PEDROSA, ENRIQUE SANTOS MARINAS. *Las vidas de Constantino-Cirilio y Metodio de Tesalónica*. Madrid: CSIC, 2022, páginas 285, ISBN 978-84-00-11000-0.

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The recent publication “Las vidas de Constantino-Cirilio y Metodio de Tesalónica” offers a comprehensive compilation, study and Spanish translation of several primary sources related to the lives and missionary activities of the famous Byzantine saints Cyril and Methodius. The task of compiling and translating hagiographic texts and various other documents in Old Slavonic, Greek and Latin represents an ambitious, noteworthy and commendable scholarly endeavour.

The book is composed by an introductory study divided into two parts, and the texts with their translations. The first part of the study summarises the life of Cyril and Methodius, their historical context, missionary activity, and the development of their cult. The second part of the introduction addresses the hagiographic texts and other primary sources compiled and translated in the book, briefly describing the main debates and facts about the origins of the texts, authorship, intention, style, early translations, manuscripts, and textual traditions.

The introductory study is followed by the presentation of the texts and their Spanish translation. First the texts that the authors describe as the “Oriental tradition”: the original lives of Constantine-Cyril and Methodius written in Old Slavonic, and the life of Saint Clement of Ohrid written in Greek. Thereafter, the Latin texts that the authors designate as the “Western tradition”: the Latin life of Cyril and translation of the relics of Saint Clement, the testimony of Anastasius the Librarian, the letters of the Popes addressing the missionary activity of Cyril and Methodius, and a Latin text describing the Western missionary activity among the Slavs, probably written by Adalwin of Salzburg against the mission of Cyril and Methodius.

One cannot overlook the significance and merit of the introductory study. This section offers an excellent summary of the historical context and history of the texts, providing readers with the necessary basic tools to engage critically with the presented material. The history of the missionary activity of Cyril and Methodius, and of the conflicts that their activity raised in the medieval Church, is an intricate and difficult issue, which has been the subject of numerous studies. Therefore, as this topic could be the subject of an extensive monograph, it is admirable how the authors succeed in addressing it briefly, discussing the most relevant aspects: those necessary to properly understand the primary sources and materials compiled by the book.

Nevertheless, possibly due to the conciseness of the introduction, some issues and questions remain unresolved. For instance, the authors claim that the original version of the lives of Cyril and Methodius is the one written in Old Slavonic, indicating that scholarship has discarded an old theory that considered a lost Greek version of the texts to be the original. Yet, they do not explain or discuss the reasoning behind the claim. Why are the Slavonic versions considered the original ones? Why Byzantine missionaries would write these hagiographies in Old Slavonic? What was the intention and target audience of these works?

Similarly, the authors do not fully address an important conundrum: Why is there no contemporary references to Cyril and Methodius in the Byzantine-Greek sources? While the silence of the Byzantine chroniclers is not that surprising – as they are mainly focussed on Constantinopolitan events –, it is very curious that the Patriarch Photios, in all his letters and writings, only mentions briefly the Christianisation of the Slavs, and never the names of Constantine-Cyril or Methodius. It seems that the *life of Clement of Ohrid*, written around AD 1100, is the earliest Greek text to mention the saints. Vladimír Vavřínek recently explained this enigma saying that the mission to Moravia “...was for Byzantium a matter of only second-rate importance and that it was for them a failure as far as their political and ecclesiastical interests were concerned”, describing then the Slavonic literature as “Byzantium unwanted child”.¹ There are two previous papers of Vavřínek that are referenced in the bibliography, but not this one from 2017, possibly published while Álvarez-Pedrosa and Santos Marinas were writing their book.

Even more recently, in 2020, Thomas Lienhard published a paper where he argued that the evidence for dating the Slavonic lives of Cyril and Methodius in the immediate decades after their deaths is inconclusive, and proposed a later dating for their composition, either in

1. Vavřínek, 2017, pp. 92-94.

the tenth or eleventh centuries.² The recent publication of this controversial take proves the authors right when, in their introduction, they say that the studies about Cyril and Methodius are almost a field on their own that continues expanding and have become a behemoth, unmanageable for one single scholar. It would have been interesting to know the authors' opinion on these problematic issues and recent bibliography, such as the silence of the Greek sources and possible alternative dates of the texts, but their silence is understandable considering that the introductory study is brief, the book is not a monograph and it is almost impossible for one or two scholars to keep up with everything that is being published about the topic on recent years.

Arguably, the book's most notable contribution is its compilation, meticulous study and excellent translation of a corpus of different sources in Old Slavonic, Greek, and Latin. This multi-linguistic approach allows access to primary sources and encourages a comparative analysis, enabling the discernment of the nuances embedded within each textual tradition. The book is certainly of incredible value to anyone interested in the life, missionary activity and cult of Cyril and Methodius. Moreover, it is a useful resource for any student or scholar interested in Byzantium, the early history of Eastern Europe and the Slavs, the Medieval Church, hagiographic production, missionary activity, religious conflict, and the relations between "Eastern" and "Western" Christianity during the Middle Ages.

Furthermore, the hagiographic narratives compiled and translated in the book are valuable in themselves as literary texts and historical sources. The Old Slavonic lives of Constantine-Cyril and Methodius are among the earliest written documents in a Slavic language. Accordingly, they were foundational pieces of the early Slavonic literature, and they represent an invaluable testimony of the primitive forms of the Slavic languages. These narratives share several common features of the hagiographic genre, such as the constant reiteration of the saint's virtues from his childhood until his death, but they also present particularities, such as the emphasis on Constantine-Cyril's theological and linguistic knowledge. The literary character of these texts, their exaggerations and biases, do not diminish their value as historical sources. For instance, the dialogues and debates that Constantine-Cyril holds with Jews or Muslims, probably fictitious or heavily embellished, offers insights into the ideas of conversion, missionary activity and religious identity in the in the ninth century. Moreover, the narratives about the origins of Cyril and Methodius, even if they were not completely accurate, offer rare and relevant information about Byzantine provincial society, and the connections between the provinces, Constantinople and the territories beyond the frontiers. In a similar way, the Latin documents compiled in the book offer valuable insights into the circulation of people, texts, objects and information between Constantinople, Rome, Eastern and Western Europe in the ninth century, and into the alliances, diplomacy and conflicts of the period.

One possible minor criticism of the edition is the format in which the original text and their translations are presented, with the full original texts first and then the complete translation. In my opinion, a parallel, page-to-page layout would have been much better, facilitating the process of cross-referencing the translation with their original counterparts. Such

2. Lienhard, 2020, pp. 57–78.

format would have been not only advantageous for the specialist, but for the student learning Greek, medieval Latin or Old Slavonic, possibly turning the book into an excellent didactic tool for learning these languages. However, this minor editorial detail does not diminish the enormous merit of the work of study, compilation and translation achieved by the authors, nor the general value of their book.

In summary, “Las vidas de Constantino-Cirilio y Metodio de Tesalónica” stands as praiseworthy academic endeavour, a work of exceptional erudition, and a scholarly milestone in the area editing and translating medieval sources. The book offers a detailed study, compilation and translation of the main primary sources concerning the life and missionary activity of the saints Constantine-Cyril and Methodius. The authors brilliantly summarised the intricate history of these figures and their influence on history of Europe and the Christian culture. However, the book’s true gem is the compilation and translation of primary sources in three different languages, enabling readers to engage in a comparative analysis across various traditions. The sources included in this book offer not only detailed information about the life of Cyril and Methodius but also insights into the early history of the Slavs and their language, the connections between ninth-century Rome and Constantinople and much more. For all these reasons, this book is a valuable resource for scholars, students and anyone interested the history of Christianity, Byzantium and Eastern Europe.

References

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