

it pushes research towards new directions through its approach; for the historian of Late Antiquity and Byzantium, it highlights the significant place of liturgy in Byzantine life and culture and moves liturgy from the periphery of the discussion of things Byzantine to its very center; for the Byzantine liturgical historian, it is a call to move beyond the presentation and history of liturgical texts and rites to the deeper study of the effect and formative power of these texts on the Byzantine worshipper; for both, it is a call for an active dialogue among the various disciplines in Byzantine Studies.

Stefanos Alexopoulos
Catholic University of America

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John Moschos' Spiritual Meadow: Authority and Autonomy at the End of the Antique World. By **Brenda Llewellyn Ihssen**. Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2014. xv + 181 pp. \$149.95 cloth.

In *John Moschos' Spiritual Meadow: Authority and Autonomy at the End of the Antique World*, Brenda Llewellyn Ihssen takes on the difficult and intriguing task of extracting social history from Moschos's famous collection of beneficial tales. The work in question was popular in its own day and remains a key literary source for Syrian and Judean monasticism in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. However, due to the challenges posed to scholars by the lack of a critical edition of the Greek text(s), Moschos's work has received less attention than it merits. Writing at length about the *Meadow* at all is therefore notable, but Ihssen's focus on the monks' humanity and social context is especially unusual, and she is successful in using the text to reflect on Christian society in the eastern Mediterranean circa 600 C.E.

Using literary analysis of the tales, Ihssen's "concern is how a particular edifying and beneficial tale reveals to us what mattered for the author and audience roughly contemporary with the text" (14). To do this, Ihssen unpacks several dozen tales over the course of this volume, often using other late antique texts as parallels. She also draws upon a wide variety of modern scholarship—including theory, history, theology, and medicine—to support her interpretations and to bring different, larger academic discussions into dialogue with one another.

After a brief personal preface (ix–x) and historical introduction (1–17), Ihssen structures her 144 pages of argument around four thematic threads that run throughout the beneficial tales: asceticism, money, illness, and

death. In chapter one (19–44), Ihssen argues that asceticism illustrates monks' fluid relationships with society, reinforcing the notion that Moschos's monks were relevant to society and vice versa. Ihssen highlights stories of monks who retreated from the world and others who went out into it, as well as secular figures who practiced an unofficial "threshold monasticism" (38) or even provided correction to faltering monks. Chapter two (45–69) surveys Moschos's similarly varied ideas about poverty and philanthropy. Moschos ultimately seems to lack a specific argument about the role of money in Christian spirituality, which leaves Ihssen's chapter a little confused and inconclusive. However, both these first chapters do usefully underscore the range of different social experiences and individual spiritual models present within the *Meadow*.

The final two chapters address topics ubiquitous in both the *Meadow* and Moschos's own world. Chapter three (71–103) shows that Moschos had a bifurcated view of illness and health: sickness was, to use Ihssen's preferred language, either to be cured or endured. Ihssen finds that "curing is the norm" for *Meadow* maladies (87), rather than pious suffering. While some tales show that bearing illness offered proof of ascetic piety, Ihssen suggests that Moschos's world had a healthy appreciation for medicine. Chapter four (105–136) discusses forewarned deaths, burials, and ghosts. Within the first two types of tale, Ihssen notes the inherent struggle between charismatic individuals and institutional authorities, such as a monastery or a bishop. The ghost stories, by contrast, are more irregular and Ihssen largely uses them to humanize Moschos's collection and its audience. Both chapters engagingly showcase ordinary social experiences from Moschos's era, from the monks' sense of humor, to the challenges of pre-modern healthcare.

The volume ends with a short conclusion (137–144), in which Ihssen rehashes her main observations from each chapter, and an impressively lengthy bibliography (145–174). Overall, the book could be more consistent in its formatting, both in its citations and with chapter structure, for a slightly more polished and unified feel.

Ihssen's monograph is essentially a collection of observations and inferences based on a well-informed and thoughtful reading of the *Meadow*. The main conclusions drawing this analysis together are that the *Meadow* inherently both celebrates a wide variety of spiritual models and values the actions and contributions of the individual, regardless of who they might be (so long as they were orthodox Christians, at least). The relatively democratic spiritual authority embraced in this last point may be significant, or at least a useful starting point for future studies of Moschos's milieu. Ihssen's conclusions make sense, though they are certainly also quite broad. Given the disparate collection with which Ihssen was working and the relative brevity of this study, however, broad conclusions are perhaps inevitable at this time.

Ihssen's argument is almost a secondary consideration for the volume, however: one of Ihssen's main goals and, indeed, triumphs in writing this book, was to highlight Moschos's monks as accessible and human. As someone who appreciates the wit of the *Meadow*, Ihssen both curates some of the best stories from the collection and writes about these with a great deal of humor herself, especially in the section on visitations by the dead. Moreover, she juxtaposes the stories against modern episodes that offer interesting parallels to the reader, for example when she presents Christopher Johnson McCandless (of *Into the Wild* fame) as practicing modern *anachoresis*. While potentially a little distracting from the historical argument, Ihssen's somewhat unconventional approaches to the material make the *Meadow* feel vibrant and relevant to a modern audience. In doing so, Ihssen should encourage future scholarship on Moschos's text.

As a final note, those readers who are already familiar with Moschos and the scholarship Ihssen references will likely get the most out of her volume. As much as a novice to the *Meadow* would certainly feel comfortable with that text based on Ihssen's discussions, her use of modern scholarship is what adds the most weight and nuance to her interpretations. Those working on the social history of this period should absolutely make use of the rich evidence available in both Ihssen and Moschos's work, but this volume seems likely to kindle scholarly discussion rather than to be the final word itself.

Hannah Ewing
Rollins College

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Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World.

By **Michael Philip Penn**. Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient

Religion. Edited by **Daniel Boyarin, Virginia Burrus, Derek**

Krueger. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 304 pp. \$59.95, cloth or e-book.

The use of Syriac sources for early Islamic history has come a long way since 1977, when Patricia Crone and Michael Cook published *Hagarism*. That provocative book drew attention to neglected, near-contemporary sources by non-Muslims in numerous Near Eastern languages, Syriac foremost among them. The largest body of early texts that discuss Muḥammad's fast-expanding movement was composed in Syriac, a literary dialect of Aramaic