

Contested Ground: Hagiography as a Tool of Triumphalist Christianity

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Among scholars of the transformation of the later Roman Empire into a Christian society, there seems to be a growing consensus that the period of most dramatic and precipitous change was not the reign of Constantine, but the decades from ca. 380 to 450. During this time, Christianity assumed a triumphalist tone and Christians employed forceful means of coercion, even violence, to assert themselves.

One of the sources that has achieved almost canonical status in illustrating these developments is the *Life of Porphyry of Gaza*. Porphyry was bishop of Gaza for 25 years until his death in 420. During this time, according to his *Vita*, he destroyed the old temple of Zeus Marnas, and in its place built a new church supported by generous donations of money, manpower and security forces by the Emperor Arcadius and his wife Eudoxia, to whom he gained access while visiting the capital thanks to the active assistance of John Chrysostom. Porphyry's missionary efforts were spectacularly successful: within the first 12 years of his episcopate, the number of Christians in Gaza is reported to have tripled in size, and it continued to grow after that.

For all its value as a colorful and detailed narrative, the text of the *Vita Porphyrii* poses a number of difficulties. There is no independent attestation that Porphyry ever existed, and the same is true for the magnificent church he is purported to have built. This is the more striking because the period of the late fourth and early fifth century is unusually rich in documentation due to the extensive literary activity of Christian writers. Further, the *Vita* presents itself as an eyewitness account by a certain Mark, who introduces himself as Porphyry's disciple and thus would most likely have composed his work in the two decades after his master's death. Yet, the sequence of events is garbled, and well-known ecclesiastical figures are given the wrong names. Moreover, the *Life of St. Porphyry* as it has come down to us begins with a prologue that is clearly plagiarized from Theodoret of Cyrillus' *History of the Monks in Syria*, which was not composed until 440.

This paper, which is part of a larger project of translation and commentary on the *Life of Porphyry of Gaza*, will propose a new explanation for these discrepancies. Rather than assuming that the text was produced in Palestine, it may make more sense to locate its composition in Constantinople, in the circle around the Emperor Arcadius. More specifically, I will suggest that it was written as a deliberate attempt to restore the public image of Arcadius and Eudoxia after the condemnation and exile of the popular Patriarch John Chrysostom in 404.

In this way, a text that had been interpreted as a narrative of pagan-Christian conflict over religious space in Palestine will be re-evaluated as a tool for re-asserting the positive image of the Theodosian dynasty as the promoters of victorious Christianity.