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978-0-521-89490-6 - Authorised Lives in Early Christian Biography: Between  
Eusebius and Augustine

Michael Stuart Williams

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## Authorised Lives in Early Christian Biography

What was distinctive about Christian biography in late antiquity? In this book, Dr Williams examines a range of biographies of prominent Christians written in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, and suggests that they share a purpose and function which sets them apart from their non-Christian equivalents. This was an age in which the lives of saints first emerged as a literary phenomenon, and a broad perspective on this developing genre is here complemented by close readings of more problematic works such as Eusebius of Caesarea's *Life of Constantine* and the *Confessions* of Augustine of Hippo. In including such idiosyncratic examples, the aim is to provide a definition of Christian biography which extends beyond mere hagiography, and which expresses a new understanding of the world and the place of individuals within it. It was a world in which lives might be authored by Christians, but could be authorised only by God.

MICHAEL STUART WILLIAMS lectures in Ancient History at the University of Cambridge.

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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	x
Introduction: biography and typology	I
1 Constantine: the authorised life	25
2 Gregory and Basil: a double life	58
3 Antony and Jerome: life on the edge	101
4 Augustine: the life of the mind	148
5 The end of sacred history	186
Conclusion: authorised lives	223
<i>Bibliography</i>	236
<i>General index</i>	260

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## PREFACE

The title of this book deliberately refers to ‘Christian biography’ for a number of reasons, but above all because I wish to make the claim that such a category exists as a distinctive form of writing, with its roots in late antiquity. It is to be distinguished therefore from the tradition of classical biography represented by such works as Xenophon’s *Cyropedia*, Suetonius’ *Lives of the Caesars*, and (above all) Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*; it is also, however, to be distinguished from biographies of pagan philosophers and miracle workers such as Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, Porphyry’s *Life of Plotinus* and Eunapius’ *Lives of the Sophists*. At the same time, the term ‘Christian biography’ is intended to connote a particular subset of early Christian writings: one which excludes the gospels (which I take to be in a category of their own) and early martyr acts (which I shall argue are not to be considered true biographies), but which is broader than the class of writings usually considered under the term ‘hagiography’. The lives of the saints that begin to appear in the fourth and fifth centuries AD are certainly worthy of study, and much work has been done to advance our understanding of the genre in the last few decades in particular. I have preferred a different term not because I feel that this work has been lacking – and on the contrary, I have derived great profit from much of it – but because I feel that a different perspective on the genre might bring new insights. My claim in this book is that our understanding of hagiography – and of the world in which it was written – can be improved by paying close attention to those texts traditionally considered to occupy the fringes of the genre.

This book thus concentrates on those biographies which are not straightforwardly accounts of saints or miracles; works which may include elements of imperial panegyric or speculative philosophy or pilgrimage narrative or autobiography; but which nevertheless seem to deploy many of the narrative techniques and

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[More information](#)

## PREFACE

presuppositions that have been recognised as appropriate to hagiography. Some of these works have been studied in detail before, although others remain remarkably underexploited, and a few are yet to be translated into English. My aim here has been to bring them together and situate them as part of an ongoing Christian discourse about the relationship between the Bible and the post-biblical world, and between the lives of individuals and their implications for the wider Christian community. I hope that in my various close readings of these texts I have managed to enlarge the scope of their possible functions and meanings; but I hope too that the works I have focused on will be recognised as sharing rather more than an accidental similarity. The juxtaposition of these texts is a significant part of the argument: that although they may derive from distant corners of the empire, and may have been composed originally in Latin, Greek, Syriac or Coptic, they reveal a consistent set of attitudes and assumptions which can only enhance our awareness of how the Christians of late antiquity understood and experienced the world around them.

A brief comment may be helpful in order to explain how I have used the Bible. When referring to or quoting the original texts I have generally not specified an edition, with the exception of when it proved necessary to note an unusual or variant reading. In providing English translations I have used a number of different modern versions, chiefly the King James or Authorised Version [AV], the Revised Standard Version [RSV] and the New English Bible [NEB]. In each case I have chosen the translation that seemed best to bring out the meaning I wished to emphasise, and have noted its source in the footnote. Consistency, in this instance, has therefore been sacrificed in favour of clarity of interpretation.

This book has its origins in a Ph.D. thesis written in Cambridge under the supervision of Christopher Kelly. He has since guided it through to its present form, and his close reading supplemented by detailed and constructive criticism has been invaluable. His influence is inscribed in this book from the title onwards, and I am very grateful. My thanks also go to Peter Garnsey and Gillian Clark, who examined the original Ph.D. thesis, and who have since offered me no end of support on this venture and on others; and to Robin Osborne, who has been interested and engaged from the

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[More information](#)

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#### PREFACE

start and who has shown remarkable good humour and willingness to help as I struggled to complete it at a desk ten feet away. Among those who have helped me with my thinking on various matters I should especially like to acknowledge the contributions of Claudia Rapp, Mark Humphries, David Scourfield and Mark Vessey. Too many others have listened to me express – or fail to express – my ideas for them all to be thanked individually; but I would especially like to thank my former colleagues in Maynooth and in Salem, and the fellows, faculty, staff and graduates in Corpus Christi and in the Faculty of Classics here in Cambridge. I should also thank Michael Sharp at Cambridge University Press for overseeing this book from inception to conclusion.

Nothing I write here will adequately capture the debts I owe to my friends and family, and to name names seems invidious. All the same, I would like to mention Ann Fielding and Rachel Smith, who have probably had to bear with me more than most; and of course my parents, who have had to witness me disappear for months at a time as I tried to devote some time to writing. I hope it will suffice to say that support can come in many guises, and that many people have contributed to this book without reading a word of it. With that in mind, I should like to dedicate this book to my grandparents.



## ABBREVIATIONS

Many of the primary sources are referred to in the footnotes in abbreviated form: a list of these abbreviations is given below. Full details regarding published editions and translations of these texts are provided in the bibliography – translations in this book are my own except where specified.

<i>C.Th.</i>	<i>Codex Theodosianus</i>
<i>Conf.</i>	Augustine of Hippo, <i>Confessionum</i>
<i>De ciu. dei</i>	Augustine of Hippo, <i>De ciuitate dei</i>
<i>De uera rel.</i>	Augustine of Hippo, <i>De uera religione</i>
<i>De util. cred.</i>	Augustine of Hippo, <i>De utilitate credendi</i>
<i>De uir. ill.</i>	Jerome, <i>De uiris illustribus</i>
<i>Doct. christ.</i>	Augustine of Hippo, <i>De doctrina christiana</i>
<i>HE</i>	Eusebius of Caesarea, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
<i>HM</i>	<i>Historia monachorum in Aegypto</i>
<i>HR</i>	Theodoret of Cyrrhus, <i>Historia Religiosa</i>
<i>In Bas.</i>	Gregory of Nyssa, <i>In Basilium fratrem</i>
<i>Io. eu. tr.</i>	Augustine of Hippo, <i>In Iohannis euangelium tractatus</i>
<i>OC</i>	<i>Oratio Constantini ad sanctos</i>
<i>Pan. lat.</i>	<i>XII panegyrici latini</i>
<i>Retr.</i>	Augustine of Hippo, <i>Retractationes</i>
<i>VA</i>	Athanasius of Alexandria, <i>Vita Antonii</i>
<i>VC</i>	Eusebius of Caesarea, <i>Vita Constantini</i>
<i>VGThaum.</i>	Gregory of Nyssa, <i>Vita Gregorii Thaumaturgi</i>
<i>VHil.</i>	Jerome, <i>Vita Hilarionis</i>
<i>VMac.</i>	Gregory of Nyssa, <i>Vita Macrinae</i>
<i>VMalchi</i>	Jerome, <i>Vita Malchi</i>
<i>VMoys.</i>	Gregory of Nyssa, <i>Vita Moysis</i>
<i>VP</i>	<i>Pachomii uita prima</i>
<i>VPauli</i>	Jerome, <i>Vita Pauli</i>

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#### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations are also used in the notes to refer to the two main collections of sources edited by J. P. Migne – the *Patrologia Latina* [PL] and *Patrologia Graeca* [PG] – and to the series of English translations of ancient patristic texts published as A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church [NPNF].