

ἀσκητική πολιτεία in the *Religious History* of Theodoret of Cyrrhus

Through a close reading of his most famous work, the *Religious History*, I will demonstrate that the prolific fifth-century author and bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus portrays the ascetic life as a city with its own public way of life, requiring laws, institutions, and founders like any other great city. In doing so he fashions monastic asceticism as a superior alternative to contemporary civic political ambitions, presenting the political class of his day with ascetic examples that its members could honorably imitate or at least respect.

Many, including, of course, Peter Brown in his most famous article, have noted the close interdependence of the earthly towns and cities of Late Antique Syria and their local holy men, and have used Theodoret's *Religious History* as a guide (Brown 1971). Relatively little attention, however, has been paid to Theodoret's own literary efforts to fashion his ascetics into the founders of new ascetic cities. Derek Krueger has noted the importance of imitation and Biblical precedents in the *Religious History* and its deep connections to Theodoret's own life (Krueger 2004). Most of all, however, this paper builds upon the work of Philip Rousseau who has not only explicated Theodoret's proposal of a new monastic παιδεία, but also described the importance of Moses and other precedents within the *Religious History* (Rousseau 1998; Rousseau 2002). I, however, argue further that this παιδεία is a crucial component of a new ascetic πολιτεία. Likewise, I note that Moses is most important in the *Religious History* as νομοθέτης, lawgiver, rather than in his usual role as the model Christian philosopher.

Although several other chapters also play with civic ideas, especially peregrination, foreignness, and homeland, for brevity's sake I will focus on the life of Marcianus, which most comprehensively exhibits the attributes of a πολιτεία, novelly attributed by Theodoret to the

Syrian ascetic milieu. My primary argument will demonstrate how Theodoret has written crucial aspects of Roman urban society to permeate the life of Marcianus. Additionally, I will note how Theodoret's careful diction evokes the political within the *Religious History*. For example, it is no accident that within the prologue, Theodoret offers ἀσκητική πολιτεία as an alternative to its primary title, φιλόθεος ιστορία. I argue that ἀσκητική πολιτεία has intrinsically societal or political connotations, rather than merely meaning an ascetic way of life, especially when seen in light of my primary argument.

Throughout the *Religious History* Theodoret uses two prevailing metaphors for new ascetic foundations: “schools of philosophy” (φιλοσοφίας φροντιστήρια) and “wrestling schools” (παλαίστρας), with the classroom and the gymnasium being two locations central to proper παιδεία and necessary for a proper Greek city (Rousseau 1998). In addition, Marcianus not only joins the great lawgiver Moses as a founding νομοθέτης, but also Solon and Lycurgus, who were inseparable from the political identity of their respective cities. Marcianus maintains this legal and political character as his disciples and heirs (κληρονόμοι) found new ascetic colonies from his monastic metropolis, and he himself acts as a judge. Furthermore, Theodoret combines Syrian asceticism's fascination with the “angelic life” and aspects of Greek civic society, yielding a new concept of angelic, heavenly society (τὴν ἐν οὐρανοῖς πολιτείαν) present paradoxically on earth – Theodoret's vision of proper monasticism. Finally, I will suggest that Theodoret casts the ascetic life (especially in its more ordered forms) as a superior political life in order to achieve his wider goals in writing the *Religious History*, such as promoting order in local ascetic life and simultaneously establishing his own authority among regional ascetics and aristocrats (Urbainczyk 2002).

Bibliography

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