J. PERKINS: *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era*
Pp. X + 209. Routledge: London and New York, 2009. Hardback, £60.-
ISBN 978-0-415-39744-5

Reviewed by Alberto Quiroga, University of Granada
albertoquiroga@terra.es

This book, though primarily focussing on the body, violence, and social, political, and religious institutions, is a thorough study of a number of topics relevant to Greek novels and early Christian texts from the first to the third centuries AD from the perspective of two cultural identities, the Roman imperial elite and the Christians.

In her introduction Perkins presents the methodology she adopts in the rest of the monograph, and at the same time offers a 'manifesto' for modern approaches to ancient Greek literature and the role of identities in the Roman empire. The first few pages are a fine example of deconstructive criticism and they demonstrate clearly how to make the most of the tendency to create artificial boundaries for cataloguing purposes. It is evident that Perkins supports Averil Cameron's and Tim Whitmarsh's perspectives on modern scholarship regarding the extent to which modern scholars can transfer contemporary concerns to past times[1]. In this sense, Perkins considers herself to be "a memorialist, looking back at a historical moment with similarities to our own" (p. 1).

Perkins begins her deconstructive process by destabilizing long-standing polarities, which are usually taken for granted: male/female, Greek/barbarian, elite/non-elite[2]. She does this in order to reconstruct and redefine what it meant to be a Christian. Perkins leaves aside recent meticulous studies on religious identities[3] and defines the term Christian as "all those people who would have applied this self-designation to themselves" (p. 3). As an oppos-

[1] T. Whitmarsh, *The Second Sophistic*, Oxford 2005, 7. Also Av. Cameron, *The long Late Antiquity: a late twentieth-century model*, in S. Fitzgerald Johnson, *Classics in Progress: Essays on Ancient Greece and Rome,* Oxford 2002, 176: "At any rate I am willing to defend the idea that history itself is perceived in the mirror of the present, and that historians bring their perceptions of the present to their view of the past".

[2] For a similar opinion see Av. Cameron, *New Themes and Styles in Greek Literature, A title revisited*, in Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (ed.), *Greek Literature in Late Antiquity. Dynamism, Didacticism, Classicism,* Oxford 2006, pp. 14-15.

[3] For instance, I. Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity. Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch*, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 3-33 offers a detailed account of research concerning the topic.

ing entity to the Christians, the elite is perceived throughout the study as a "trans-empire group identity evolving in the early empire of persons bound together by ties of privilege, education, culture, and connections with the imperial centre and by the shared self-identity these ties constituted" (p. 5).

With regards to methodology, one might consider this book to be within the realm of Foucault's and Bourdieu's models of social groups, especially Bourdieu's famous theory of the *habitus*; however, Perkins does not confine her survey to these two theorists. Her working assumption is that ancient Greek novels may be used as a means of determining the extent to which the Christian cultural movement overlapped with and interrupted the elite imperial discourse at the same time in which the Christian movement gained institutional presence.

The first chapter, "Cosmopolitan Identities", investigates the construction of the identity of both the trans-empire elite and Christianity. According to Perkins, the identity of the imperial elite was constructed by placing the classical *paideia* at the epicentre of the cultural and educational milieu. In doing so, the Herodotean conception of 'Greekness', which is based on the sharing of blood, speech, and way of life (Hdt. 8.144), is left behind, since *paideia* had become the new common element by means of which it was possible to gather people of the elite from different backgrounds and origins. The impact of *paideia* on the society and the politics of the first centuries AD has been extensively discussed by scholars recently, but Perkins avoids rehashing the arguments, and views *paideia* as a multiform and multilateral concept found in elite environments and bearing testimony to the real superiority of elite groups. Those belonging to the elite are versed in *paideia*, which cements "social ties among the imperial trans-national elite" (p. 25). Thus *paideia* is seen to be responsible for the creation of an endogamic society in the multicultural world of the Roman empire, and for the creation of a relationship along the lines of *do ut des*, in which "elites from across the eastern empire joined with Rome in the management of its empire, and in turn received Rome's support for their position and privileges, as long as they helped ensure peace and tranquility within their respective cities and avoid civic problems" (p. 23).

Nevertheless, Christians soon came to realize this 'us-vs.-them' polarity, which had become a long standing tradition in Greek culture, when it came to self-definitions. If the trans-empire alliance of the elite incorporated leading people across the empire by adopting *paideia* as the dominant and driving force, Christians now started to regard themselves as a cosmopolitan entity and to portray themselves as 'the others'. Perkins includes in her dis-

cussion a number of early Christian texts (*Letter of Barnabas, Epistle to Diognetus*, Tertullian's *Apologeticus*), in which the vocabulary illustrates how Christian authors both claimed that they were starting a new group and wished to demonstrate their cosmopolitanism.

However, the main question Perkins poses in this chapter is borrowed from Buell´s *Why this new Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (2005): "Can we view Christian universalism as a discourse that mimics and refracts imperial discourse and practices seeking to produce a collective subject-position with alternative universal ideas?". In answering this, Perkins argues that Christians constructed a new collective identity, yet what remains to be analyzed is the extent to which Christian discourse disengaged from that of the elite. Thus, it is at this stage that an agreement seems more difficult to reach, because the primary sources are not easy to reconcile: the *Epistle to Diognetus* depicts Christians as mere temporary residents who are almost forced to fulfill their role as citizens, and Clement of Alexandria states that they have no *patria* on this earth; on the other hand and in contrast to the above, Tertullian encourages his readers to pray for the emperor and the Empire.

The second chapter, "False Deaths and New Bodies", deals with fictional deaths in the literature of the first three centuries AD; the starting point of the discussion is Glen Bowersock's theory on apparent deaths, namely that Christian stories and the cultural background had a strong impact on contemporary narrative[4]. However, Perkins does not quite agree with Bowersock; she argues that Christian texts and ancient novels show a similar degree of interaction –not influence– and that they react to a changing society by including violence and false deaths in their discourses[5]. Perkins singles out the roles of heroines in the Greek novels (e.g., Callirhoe in Chariton 1.4.12; Chariclea in Heliodorus 2.3.3; Anthia in Xenophon of Ephesus 3.6.5, 2.13.3, 4.6.4; Leucippe in Achilles Tatius 3.15.5, 5.7.4, 7.3.8), and shows how their false deaths should be read as a "social death", since the women are detached from their social status. Violence and dismemberment are, according to Perkins, metaphors of social and political disengagement, and in this regard they could be considered the *pièce de résistance* of Greek identity, highlighting how impervious Greek culture was to Roman imperialism. In contrast to this, the happy endings of various novels, which include the

[4] G. Bowersock, *Fiction as History. From Nero to Julian*, Berkeley, 1994.

[5] E. Gunderson, *Declamation, Paternity, and Roman Identity. Authority and the Rhetorical Self,* Cambridge, 2003, p. 53 and *passim* discusses body mutilations and false deaths in *suasoriae* and *controversiae*.

reunion and the marriage of the hero and the heroine, would symbolize the preservation of Greek elite identity under the Roman regime.

The representation in Christian texts of martyrs who are devoured by beasts is, according to Perkins, less metaphorical than the dismemberment of the heroines in the Greek novels. Gruesome violence, for Perkins, is treated not so much as threat, but as the means of becoming a martyr. Ignatius of Antioch's *Epistle to the Romans* or the *Passion of Perpetua* provide us with gory passages, in which the process of being eaten by beasts is presented as a most desirable death. Encouraged by the doctrine of material resurrection and the promise of an immune body, Christians from the first to third centuries considered themselves to have a new identity, and by showing willingness to be devoured by wild beasts they sought to prove that this world was merely a preliminary stage to the real world which follows.

In the ensuing chapter, "Constructing a Patriarchal Elite", Perkins argues that Greek novels, elite educational systems, and the Roman empire were three different concepts intimately intertwined. To support this view, Perkins provides us with a brief but insightful analysis of texts by Dio, Plutarch, and Aristides, in which *homonoia* is considered as the cornerstone of the attitude of the Greek elite towards Roman imperialism. Trading subordination for the maintenance of one's status seems to have been implicit in philosophical and rhetorical works which called for civic harmony, and it is in this context that Perkins considers that the heroes in the Greek novels were enormously influenced by the political panorama of the period[6]. Yet the indecisiveness and the unmanly behaviour of these heroes has long been regarded as a major weakness or failure in the construction of their *ethos*. However, Perkins suggests that their 'passive' behaviour and their inability to endure adversities squares with the attitude of the Greek elite towards Rome. The heroes of the Greek novels are presented as self-satisfied and they try to avoid problems. Perkins's point that Greek novels created metonymies for social status instead of real characters is in itself convincing but perhaps requires further support from more primary sources.

"Resurrection and Judicial Bodies", the fourth chapter of this book, focuses on the place of the human body in the Roman judicial system and the impact that Christian body-politics subsequently had upon it. Perkins discusses non-Christian concepts of the body and demonstrates that the dominant pattern presented the body as a mere and perishable annex of the soul.

[6] An excellent *complementary* reading is A. Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium. The Transformation of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 260-271.

The worldly nature of the body set social boundaries, since the elite depreciated those people who were concerned with their material body instead of their intellectual and spiritual inner self. However, during the second and third centuries AD, the agenda of the Christians was articulated throughout the resurrection of the flesh. Texts from Justin and Irenaeus prove that, at this stage, the materiality of Jesus' body was at the centre of Christological debates, and that even those who thought otherwise were condemned as heretics (e.g., Irenaeus criticizing the Valentinians). Indeed, the emphasis put on the resurrection of the flesh had yet another important impact upon the Roman judicial system; as Perkins points out, non-elite people (*humiliores*) were liable to suffer physical punishment, whereas the *honestiores* enjoyed legislative inmmunity towards such punishment. Therefore, in defending physical resurrection and in considering that every person's body and soul were equal, the Christians challenged the prejudices of the *honestiores* towards non-elite groups.

In the fifth chapter, "Place, Space, and Voice", Perkins continues her investigation of trials and punishments as a means of defining trans-empire elite groups and Christians. The abundance of judicial proceedings and of martyrological acts and accounts provides a number of instances which appear to serve two different purposes: to strengthen the privileged social status of the characters in the Greek novels and to represent Christian identity by subverting violence and by suggesting that prisons are the natural habitat of the Christians. However, examples of opposing perceptions of places and spaces are also discussed, notably Clitophon's punishment for the falsely convicted killing of Leucippe, a punishment which, according to Perkins, represents the dangers that elite members could face if they lose their social status. Christian acts, in contrast, depict endurance of violence and imprisonment as triumph.

Furthermore, Perkins stresses how much the Greek novels overlooked the criminal activities of elite members, how torture set up boundaries between the *humiliores* and the *honestiores* (e.g., see Chaereas' and Theron's treatment in Chariton's novel), and how, on the other hand, Christians took possession of places, spaces, and situations that were considered anti-civic. Through subverting the significance of prisons and tortures, Christians created a new identity and a new antipodean rhetoric to counteract the message of *homonoia* and social cohesion found in Greek novels. Violence and punishments were included as means of asserting Christian autonomy as an independent entity, with new spaces such as prisons becoming the locations to display their anti-civic behaviour.

The next chapter, “Trimalchio: Transformations and Possibilities”, appears to be somewhat out of place at this point; its argument would have been more effective in the discussions of previous chapters. In her analysis of the so-called *Cena Trimalchionis* Perkins wants to emphasize that non-elite and self-made men showed a similar attitude towards education, culture, and the body; in this they differed from the Christians. Boasting of not having heard a single philosopher, inviting slaves to the dinner-table, and refusing to be influenced by the contemporary contempt for the material body constitutes, for Perkins, an alternative *paideia* which contests the dominant viewpoints. Petronius’ characters, though far from being Christian, seem to challenge the *status quo*.

In the next chapter, “Resurrection and Social Perspectives”, Perkins’ working assumption is that the resurrection of the body was central to the development of Christian theories in the second century AD. The *Acts of John* and the *Acts of Peter* represent two opposite views on the resurrection of the material body. In the former the non-human nature of Jesus and the emphasis on the resurrection of the spirit prevail over any other concept. On the other hand, the *Acts of Peter* stresses the implications of the material resurrection from an ontological point of view, and also takes social issues into account. The *Acts of Peter* (36) states that “the whole crowd of the brethren came together, rich and poor, orphans and widows, the powerful and the weak”, adopting an inclusive attitude towards the social spectrum. However, the *Acts of John* opts for a highly hierarchical society – not in vain is John himself said to have had greater ability to communicate with and understand Jesus.

In the following chapter, “The Rhetoric of the Maternal Body”, Perkins continues to engage with the debate about the body in second century AD Christianity. Here Perkins contrasts Tertullian’s and Marcion’s views regarding incarnation. According to Tertullian, Jesus (*Carm. Chr*. 4.6) “was born, born, moreover, of a virgin, born with a body of flesh”. The feminine body is described and represented without contempt, when it came to writing about birth or lactation in Tertullian or in other works, such as the *Passion of Perpetua*. In Marcion’s works, on the other hand, hatred for the body and its flesh as a reminder of the animal nature of humans is very much in abundance.

Finally, “Competing Chronologies” re-evaluates Ramsay MacMullen’s seminal article, “What Difference Did Christianity Make?” (*Historia* 35 (1986), which Perkins uses essentially to summarize her views. Perkins argues that, whereas Second Sophistic texts, as representative of the trans-

empire alliance of the elite, focused mainly on the influence of the past, second and third century AD Christian texts were dominated by a new ideology that aimed at challenging the monopoly of the elite in more than one aspect. Christianity contributed to the modification of judicial practices, and became a player in the political arena at a time when the elite imperial discourse was totalizing.

To conclude, this is an inspiring monograph that never fails to make its points clear, providing an abundance of secondary bibliography that complements the primary sources. A literary analysis of the Greek novels, however, is missing, and one finishes the book with the impression that the literature of the Second Sophistic, the Greek novels, and the Christian texts are still waiting to be thoroughly deciphered. Nevertheless, Perkins' book is essential reading for scholars interested in Greek novels and early Christianity.