

STEPHEN MITCHELL, *The Christians of Phrygia from Rome to the Turkish Conquest* (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 117; Early Christianity in Asia Minor 4). Leiden: Brill 2023. xxiii+698 pp., 77 figures, and 15 maps. – ISBN 978-90-04-54637-0

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Beginning with his magisterial *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods* (1993), STEPHEN MITCHELL (1948–2024) devoted his career to the study of Asia Minor. The book under review here represents his final, learned offering on the subject, focused on one of the most extraordinary regions for the study of early Christianity.

Like the other books in the *Early Christianity in Asia Minor* series, *The Christians of Phrygia* charts the development of Christianity in this region, from its origins through the Byzantine period. The narrative is built largely from material remains (primarily inscriptions, but also churches), situated within the wider regional culture – or rather cultures: in Roman Phrygia, ‘indigenous’ Phrygians mixed with Greek-background or Greek-educated individuals, with Jewish communities, with Italian immigrants, and (from the fourth century CE), with Gothic settlers. Phrygia was little urbanized before the Roman period,¹ and even in the imperial period, cities were mostly small. Resources were invested in rural contexts (elite estates, rural sanctuaries), rather than in the urban benefactions more commonly seen in the major metropoleis of Asia Minor. This is the region where a city put Noah’s ark on its coins beginning around 200 CE, where tomb curses were given in the neo-Phrygian language (written in Greek letters), and where female prophetesses (later called Montanists) declared a small town to be the new Jerusalem. In spite of its unusual features, the highland Phrygian region was not as insulated from wider Greco-Roman culture as it might initially appear: local military men, such as one Aurelius Gaius, travelled all around the Roman empire, from Spain to Egypt (pp. 221–223; ICG 1379).

MITCHELL’s narrative of Christianity in Phrygia starts in the second century, when individuals identified as ‘Phrygians’ start to show up in in some

1. PETER THONEMANN, Phrygia: An Anarchist History, 950 BC–AD 100. In: IDEM (ed.), *Roman Phrygia: Culture and Society* (Greek Culture in the Roman World). Cambridge 2013, pp. 1–40.

of our earliest written sources for Christianity, in places such as Smyrna and Lyon. This prelude is followed by a geographical overview (highlighting the importance of natural features, such as the marble at Docimium, which allowed even humble people to put up gravestones). Chapter 3 covers Phrygia's pagan sanctuaries, giving a sense of the wider cultural matrix in which Christianity took hold.

Chapter 4, on the 'long third century' (ca. 180–330 CE) will be of great interest to anyone who works on early Christianity, whether from a historical, patristic, or archaeological point of view. The small town of Orcistus in eastern Phrygia famously claimed in a petition to Constantine (late 320s) that its entire population was Christian. Was Orcistus representative of Phrygia as a whole, and how (and when) did the conversion of the region take place? MITCHELL goes through the evidence, such as the well-known 'Christians for Christians' tombstones of the mid 3rd century (pp. 198–215) with patient attention to detail. We encounter a fascinating cast of early Christian characters: Aurelia Tatiane, bishop's wife, who commissioned a grave stone at Temenothyrae around 212 CE with an extraordinary relief (a radiant cross disk on a table; ICG 1373, pp. 180–183); a man with the Semitic name Roubes, 'servant of the great god Christ', mentioned in two grave inscriptions dated around 250–270 at Eumeneia (pp. 157–176, ICG 1031 and 1028), and Roubes' friend Gaius, a lawyer who wrote technically almost flawless funerary verse. We get to know these and more pre-Constantinian Christians through the words they left behind on their gravestones – but we (almost) never see their faces. One of the striking features of these early Christian steles, viewed in their wider cultural setting, is their aniconic decorative schemes: whereas pagan Roman farmers in Phrygia, and even some shepherds, chose to depict themselves and their family members on their tombstones (in a charmingly simple local style),² most contemporary Roman Christian tombstones – made in the same workshops as the pagan ones – eschewed human figures entirely. These workshops even developed new decorative motifs specifically for their Christian customers, such as a cross-in-wreath design that originated ca. 280 CE (pp. 215–218).

A general picture of the development of Phrygian Christianity in the long third century emerges. Its adherents were drawn from all social classes, in-

2. JANE MASSÉGLIA, *Phrygians in Relief: Trends in Self-Representation*. In: PETER THONEMANN (ed.), *Roman Phrygia: Culture and Society* (Greek Culture in the Roman World). Cambridge 2013, pp. 95–123.

cluding the landed gentry: Christians of the Upper Tembris Valley were ‘numerous, self-confident and prosperous’ (p. 261). Why is Phrygia the location of so many pre-Constantinian Christian gravestones, whereas we have so few from coastal Asia Minor? MITCHELL finds little evidence for communities going back to the apostolic era (as we might be tempted to posit for cities such as Pisidian Antioch, proselytized by St. Paul), but rather focuses on the pre-existing pagan beliefs in Roman Phrygia, which included the immortality of the soul and adherence to concepts such as righteousness and justice (personified by the gods Hosios and Dikaios).³ Christianity was not ubiquitous in Phrygia in the third century, however; the northern regions around Aezani show very few traces of it (pp. 192–198).

The following chapter, on the material evidence for Christianity from the fourth to the eleventh century, will be of interest mainly to regional specialists. In most cases, continuity in Christian communities cannot be traced: the areas which had large numbers of pre-Constantinian Christian tombstones are oddly lacking in tombstones in late antiquity. Rural prosperity is apparent in the building of churches in villages; rural anti-pagan sentiment is also visible in a number of shrines that evidence apparent Christian destruction (pp. 403–406). The importance of the archangel Michael in Anatolian Christianity is highlighted: he received more prayers (epigraphically recorded) than the Theotokos (p. 521).

Chapter 6 turns to Phrygian saints, of which there are few authentic historical records, but a number of hagiographies that provide engaging reading (and which are themselves historical evidence for late antique piety). Chapter 7 covers heretics, schisms, and dissenters. The final chapter sums up the development of Christianity in Phrygia, while also touching on wider topics, such as the demographic growth of Christians across the Roman empire and Nero’s scapegoating of Christians for the fire of Rome. ‘Coming out’ as Christian in third-century Phrygia is compared with coming out as gay in the twentieth-century UK, not in terms of substantive content (being gay and being Christian are obviously two different things), but in terms of embracing social and individual dispositions that were technically illegal (pp. 589–592).

So much of the evidence in the book is epigraphic, and MITCHELL’s method

3. See now also ROBERT PARKER, *Religion in Roman Phrygia: From Polytheism to Christianity*. Oakland 2023, p. 200, who emphasizes rather the ‘markedly communitarian character of village life’.

for dealing with inscriptions is rightfully interdisciplinary, arguing for the importance of context and details of not only the texts but also the carved imagery and decoration. MITCHELL – a scholar who could write ‘big history’ narratives (such as his *History of the Later Roman Empire*, Malden and Oxford 2007) – understood that each stone needs to be considered in minute detail in order to confirm (or deny) its Christian identification and to glean information from it. There are no shortcuts in this methodology. Interested readers will want to read the book side by side with the *Inscriptiones Christianae Graecae* (ICG) online [database](#), which includes photos of many inscriptions not illustrated in the book (and which also provides translations of the Greek texts into German or English; MITCHELL assumes a specialized readership, and gives translations only for the more complex inscriptions). But some of MITCHELL’s own photos, published in the book, are of a higher quality than older published images on the ICG, so users of that database may too find themselves turning to the book.

Another aspect of MITCHELL’s methodology is his devotion to historical gain, against a prevailing academic wind favoring deconstruction and the raising of doubts. Numerous third-century tombstones display the ‘Eumeneian formula’, which threatens a ‘reckoning with god’ to anyone who disturbs the grave (pp. 110–115). While some are clearly Christian, it has recently been argued that other stones using this formula may be either Christian or Jewish (thereby removing these tombstones from analysis as early evidence of Christianity).⁴ MITCHELL disagrees: if there is no other evidence for a Jewish community in the area where such tombstones are found, they should be regarded as Christian. ‘This is important, as it makes this material available for the enquiry,’ rather than left out as unclassifiable (p. 115). The surrounding context is also critical for MITCHELL’s interpretation of the third-century Noah’s ark coins of Phrygian Apamea: these coins have usually been interpreted as an indication of a prominent Jewish community, but, lacking much other evidence for such a community in the city, MITCHELL interprets the coins instead as Christian-influenced (pp. 115–133). It was precisely in the same period that Christian tombstones started to appear in significant numbers in this area. He moreover argues that an unusual sixth-century church, which appears to be almost ‘beached’

4. PAUL TREBILCO, The Christian and Jewish Eumeneian Formula. *Mediterraneo Antico* 5 (2002) pp. 63–97; ULRICH HUTTNER, Christliche Grenzgänger und ihre Inschriften. In: STEFAN ALKIER – HARTMUT LEPPIN (eds), *Juden, Christen, Heiden? Religiöse Inklusion und Exklusion in Kleinasien bis Decius (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 400)*. Tübingen 2018, pp. 149–169.

on the crest of a mountain next to Apamea, was meant to commemorate the spot where Noah's ark had come aground, in this long-lasting local version of the diluvian legend (pp. 434–437).

This focus on historical gain is also apparent in MITCHELL's handling of the Abercius tombstone (ICG 1597), the 'queen of Christian inscriptions' (according to GIOVANNI BATTISTA DE ROSSI). Abercius' epitaph is reconstructed both from fragments of the stone now in the Vatican and from a fuller copy recorded in the late antique *Life of Abercius*. MARKUS VINZENT has recently argued that the late antique author of the *Life* stitched together two unrelated stones to create this longer version of the epitaph,⁵ but MITCHELL convincingly denies this on metrical grounds, also noting that Vinzent's thesis 'provides no historical gain' (p. 95). The stone in the Vatican would still be an early Christian tombstone, of a man whom we would be obliged to refer to as 'Abercius.' After defending the full epitaph as an authentic record of a prominent second-century Christian man, Abercius (Avircius Marcellus in Eusebius), MITCHELL also examines the late antique *Life of Abercius* more closely. PETER THONEMANN has proposed that the *Life* made use not only of Abercius' tombstone in its narrative, but of other authentic second-century inscriptions as well (which have not survived). So too, according to THONEMANN, did the *Martyrdom of Ariadne of Prymnessos*, another anonymous late antique hagiography for a different Phrygian saint.⁶ MITCHELL brilliantly moves this argument forward by suggesting 1) that both of these hagiographies were by the same author (the two tales are unusual, combining elements of ancient romances with Christian piety, of humor with learned philosophical discussion); and 2) that the author made use, not of second-century inscriptions, but of written documents from the archive of Ti. Claudius Vibianus Tertullus, who held the high office of *ab epistulis graecis* (in charge of imperial correspondence with the Greeks) from ca. 175 to 177 CE (pp. 488–505). The anonymous author of the two hagiographies may have been a descendant of this man, who made use of his papers – kept in the family for generations – to add an authentic flavor to his late antique literary works. 'A cultivated

5. MARKUS VINZENT, *Writing the History of Early Christianity: From Reception to Retrospection*. Cambridge 2019, 77–161.

6. PETER THONEMANN, *Abercius of Hierapolis: Christianization and Social Memory in Late Antique Asia Minor*. In: BEATE DIGNAS – R.R.R. SMITH (eds), *Historical and Religious Memory in the Ancient World*. Oxford 2012, 257–282; PETER THONEMANN, *The Martyrdom of Ariadne of Prymnessos and an Inscription from Perge*. Chiron 45 (2015) pp. 151–170.

writer of the fourth century did not need to supplement reading in his family papers with epigraphic field work' (p. 505).

Another important contribution is MITCHELL's argument against the identification of pre-Constantinian tombstones as 'crypto-Christian'. The use of this term 'has ghosted its way through discussions of Phrygian Christianity for a century' (p. 202). Disguising a Christian message on a tombstone goes against the main aim of epigraphic display, which is using formulaic language and a visual code of symbols to communicate and perpetuate the memory of the deceased individual(s) (p. 86). Christian families in the small towns and villages of Phrygia could hardly have hoped to hide their religious persuasion from their neighbors. And why should they have? MITCHELL argues that there is little evidence for persecution in Phrygia: only one martyr from the region, Trophimus, is clearly attested; a third-century reliquary naming him and apparently containing his skull was found in the early twentieth century (pp. 304–305, 480–484).

Likewise, this region is closely associated with Montanism, called the 'Phrygian heresy' in our sources (pp. 531–532). Yet Montanism plays a much smaller role in MITCHELL's book than we might expect.⁷ He identifies very few inscriptions as Montanist (p. 541); the majority of the tombstones show no indications contrary to mainstream Christianity at the time. The late second/early third-century Christian priestess (πρεσβύτερα) Ammion from Temenothyrae (ICG 1372; p. 183) need not be Montanist, according to MITCHELL (though the prophetess Nanas a century later very well may have been, pp. 296–300). The rigorist Novation church is explicitly attested in a small number of inscriptions and written sources (pp. 257–258, 544–560). Often viewed from the outside as a place of heterodoxy and religious excesses, Phrygia is here re-situated within broader strains of normative Christianity.

This book – written by a scholar who devoted so much of his life to studying the epigraphy, written sources, and archaeological remains of Asia Minor – is a testament to interdisciplinary research, and to engagement in different academic cultures. MITCHELL spent substantial time in Türkiye for his fieldwork and involvement with the British Institute at Ankara, and lived his final years in Berlin, where he was deeply involved in German research projects and activities. Turkish, German, French, and other schol-

7. Cf. PAUL McKECHNIE, *Christianizing Asia Minor: Conversion, Communities, and Social Change in the Pre-Constantinian Era*. Cambridge 2019, which gives Montanism much great prominence in his narrative of Phrygian Christianity.

arship informs every page of this book. MITCHELL's historical expertise likewise spanned from the Hellenistic to the Roman and late antique periods, with frequent forays into Byzantium. This allows MITCHELL to contextualize the rise of Christianity within older traditions of Anatolia. Other scholars will certainly disagree with some of MITCHELL's conclusions in *The Christians of Phrygia*, but we are fortunate that a scholar of such caliber and such experience has left behind such a detailed, engaging, and persuasive book on so many subjects of the highest interest.

Keywords

Christianization; rural life; early Church; Asia Minor; hagiography; epigraphy