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Synesius and late Roman Cyrenaica

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DENIS ROQUES, *SYNÉSIOS DE CYRÈNE ET LA CYRÉNAÏQUE DU BAS-EMPIRE* (Études d'Antiquités Africaines, Éditions du C.N.R.S., Paris 1987). Pp. 492, fig.15. ISSN 0768-2351; ISBN 2-222-03866-9. FF 550. DENIS ROQUES, *ÉTUDES SUR LA CORRESPONDANCE DE SYNÉSIOS DE CYRÈNE* (Collection Latomus 205, Bruxelles 1989) Pp. 274. ISBN 2-87031-145-1. FrBelg 1300.

It is becoming increasingly clear that economic decline was not a uniform phenomenon in the late Roman world. Parts of late Roman North Africa, for example, are now thought to have been relatively prosperous throughout the 4th century. Cyrenaica (so it has been assumed in the past) fell into an early decline.¹ Denis Roques has for some time been studying the varied works of Synesius for the light they cast on Cyrenaica in the late 4th and early 5th c. His conclusion, set out in the two books under review, is that earlier scholars got it all wrong. Cyrene was not, as contemporaries said and modern scholars have unthinkingly repeated, in a state of irreversible decline by the age of Synesius. He also argues that Christianity made much earlier and more solid progress in Cyrenaica than hitherto believed. Some early reviewers have reacted enthusiastically to both these theses (K. Treu, *BZ* 82 [1989] 258-59; H. Hunger, *JÖBG* 39 [1989] 337-40).

There is much in *Synésios de Cyrène* that is admirable. A number of descriptive chapters give a full and useful account of the geography, frontiers, cities and civil and military administration, as well as the social, economic, religious and ecclesiastical life of Cyrenaica. The book is well documented and generally up to date (except on military affairs). I make no claim to control all the areas Roques has treated, and the remarks that follow are highly selective.

The letters and chronology of Synesius

Roques' earlier book is largely built up from references to the works of Synesius, especially his letters. No dates are attached to Synesius' letters as they have been transmitted to us, nor, like some other corpora of letters from late antiquity, are they arranged in even a semblance of chronological sequence. Yet readers will notice that Roques assigns them all remarkably precise dates. The later of the two books explains these dates, and attempts to establish the chronology of Synesius' life and correspondence. Unfortunately, it has to be said that the cavalier and arbitrary way in which Roques handles these texts robs his conclusions of all plausibility — and makes one wonder about his judgment in other areas. Where earlier scholars hesitated between decades or years, Roques has no hesitation in fixing dates to within months, weeks and even days. Nor can it be said that he reaches this greater precision by using a wider base of evidence. Quite the contrary. He focuses narrowly on the evidence of Synesius' text. On political and prosopographical questions he takes one or two standard works as his guide and normally accepts their conclusions without question.

Roques was unlucky in his timing. He completed his manuscript in 1982, since when a number of relevant studies have appeared. The central date for the chronology of the first half of Synesius' life is his three-year visit to Constantinople (*Hymn* 1.428 f.; *de insomn.* p.175.16 Terzaghi). Many letters clearly belong either before or after this visit, and, depending on the date assigned to it, they can be given more or less precise absolute as well as relative dates. It has to be said that the way in which Roques handles this question is profoundly unsatisfactory — and was so even in 1982. He accepts Seeck's date of 399-402 without question, repeatedly referring to Seeck's "definitive demonstration" (p.13, 17, 132, and 235), but without ever stating the issues or even citing the texts on which this "demonstration" was based. This means that what purports to be an independent re-examination of Synesius' chronology is actually nothing

1 Joyce Reynolds, "The cities of Cyrenaica in decline," *Thèmes de recherche sur les villes antiques d'occident* (Colloque International de Strasbourg 1-4 octobre, 1971, Paris 1977) 53-58.