Walter D. Ward, ***The Mirage of the Saracen. Christians and Nomads in the Sinai Peninsula in Late Antiquity***. Transformations of the Classical Heritage 54. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015. Pp. xxiii+193. Hardcover. ISBN 978-0520283770.

The history of monastic settlement in the Sinai peninsula—particularly the sites of Pharan, Raithou, and St. Catherine's—is bound up with the history of the region's nomadic population. Monks told thrilling stories of the violence and rapacity of the nomadic tribes, which they referred to largely as "Saracens." There were early on accounts of martyrdom—of monks killed by raiding parties in their churches and cells—which led to the veneration of the Forty Martyrs of Sinai (a bit like the Forty of Sebaste), and were woven into stories of holy places—Mt. Sinai of legend, the Burning Bush, Elijah's Cave—all of which the monks would show to the many pilgrims who tramped across hundreds of miles of burning sand, hoping to follow the footsteps of the ancient Israelites and to meet God.

Walter Ward hopes to problematize the monastic accounts of martyrdom in the Sinai and, in particular, characterization of the "Saracens" therein. Drawing his hermeneutic from postcolonial studies, Ward convincingly argues that the account of the nomadic peoples given by monastic literature is an example of caricature and falsification of the "Other" made to reinforce the monks' own self-conception and to propagate their own sanctity—an important commodity in the pilgrimage industry. Ward develops his argument from a necessarily limited range of literature—Eusebius' *Onomasticon*, the narratives of Ps-Anastasius of Sinai and Ammonius, Egeria and the Piacenza Pilgrim's travelogues, and the *Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes. His reading of all but Eusebius comes from Daniel Caner's indispensable *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai*.[1] Ward strives to read these texts against the grain, to find in them details and hints of what lay behind or beyond the stereotypes of hagiography and cultural construction. This sort of effort has borne fruit elsewhere in studies by scholars like David Frankfurter and David Brakke of Late Antique Egypt, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Shenoute of Atripe.[2]

Ward treats the "Saracens" first, developing a speculative account of Sinaite nomads from studies of nomadic tribes in the Negev. He argues that, instead of being merely violent and rapacious, these tribes "interacted with the sedentary inhabitants, possibly in mutually beneficial ways" (21). Of course, he admits that, though red slip pottery is found at campsites, "Archaeology cannot answer the question whether

[1] Caner, Daniel. 2009. *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai*. Translated Texts for Historians. Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press.

[2] See, for example, Frankfurter, David. 1999. *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance*. Trenton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Brakke, David. 1995. *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*. Oxford Early Christian Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, and 2006. *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

these goods were acquired through trade or violence" (21)—such optimistic uncertainty plagues Ward's argument throughout the book. He also argues, more convincingly, that the groups referred to as "Saracens" were not homogenous, that some were "pagan" and some "Christian", and that stereotyping has leveled out the real differences between peoples.

In the next chapter, Ward examines the early history of monasticism and Sinaite pilgrimage. His account of early monasticism retreads familiar ground, but his tracing of pilgrimage routes into the Sinai is both fascinating and useful. In the third chapter, Ward discusses the sites of Sinai and shows how it was late antique monks who associated geographic points of interest with Biblical stories. In essence, monks rather fancifully overlaid the Sinaite landscape with Biblical myth-history, so as to "enhance their own spiritual journeys, also increasing their own sanctity as well" (75). Admittedly, Ward does not seem to appreciate the monastic endeavor—he thinks of sanctity *only* in terms of a commodity to be traded, and seems to think that the main purpose of showing pilgrims holy sites was to "prove" the reality of Biblical events, which is a rather curious notion. So eager is he to locate them in the social world of late- and post-Roman politics, that Ward has little interest in the work, prayer, or daily lives of the monks. Thus, while filling out a portrait of nomads, Ward has only sketched—at times caricatured—monks.

Ward devotes the fourth chapter to martyrdom accounts. He argues at length that the monks displaced the nomads from their traditional lands and that the violence which monks later suffered at the hands of nomadic raiding parties was akin to the violence of Native Americans against white settlers. His footnotes (on genocides in the Americas) suggest that he thinks of the monks as violently displacing nomadic groups—but there is no evidence of that happening, and there is no evidence of monastic numbers reaching the levels they did in the Egyptian desert, making it hard to imagine the monks as genocidal colonialists. Ward claims that "the nomads may have viewed the monks and pilgrims as usurping the traditional power structure, as transforming traditional modes of living in the Sinai, and responded accordingly" (110). That is a very big "perhaps." Moreover, Ward offers no parallel accounts from Egypt or North Africa to suggest the plausibility of this claim, and has earlier noted that "When trade does not provide adequate sustenance for the pastoralists, or when an easy opportunity presents itself, goods can be obtained by the pastoralists through violence, coercion, or theft from other nomadic or sedentary groups. Nomadic groups also engage in raids to kidnap for ransom or enslavement" (20). Given that those are precisely the accusations made by martyr literature, given the lack of any direct evidence, and given the sheer number of hypothetical suppositions involved, it is hard to take Ward's account very seriously. One can only wonder why he has not even mentioned present-day interactions between the monks of St. Catherine's and local non-Christian nomadic populations, which are largely symbiotic—memories run deep in the Sinai, and surely this would help fill out his portrait of both monks and "Saracens."

Ward's last two chapters concern the imperial response to perceived Saracen threat in the 6th Century; and the Islamic invasions of the 7th. Ward argues that the nomads did not constitute a threat in the Sinai, because they did not constitute a threat along the eastern frontiers. Of course, his main evidence is that after the installation of troops (another supposition) only one incident is recorded, in which a group of monks were able to withstand a Saracen siege, presumably by retreating into the newly-built *kastron*, or fortified monastery (114). I do not know if this counts as evidence for "perceived" or "real" threats. Moreover, I wonder why there are no accounts of "victories for the God-loving emperors over the wicked Saracens"—Byzantines had no trouble glorying in the bloodshed of enemies (real or perceived), so one has to wonder why no one mentions it in the Sinai? The simplest explanation, of course, is that there wasn't any, or very little.

Ward's book offers a creative reading of the sources, certainly, and when taken as a reminder to read against stereotypes, is very effective. Most of its grander suppositions must remain hypothetical (if not also implausible), because Ward's argument consistently suffers from a lack of evidence. Neither archaeology, nor epigraphy (he mentions "hundreds" of nomad inscriptions but reads none), nor literary sources provide the hard evidence Ward needs. Rather, he builds his claims upon a sandy foundation of frequent "if's" and "perhaps's", some of which are plausible, and many of which are not. More troublingly, Ward compounds the lack of evidence with vagaries and oblique gestures. He speaks of "economic behaviors" but does not explain them; he insinuates analogies between monks and modern colonists, but rarely offers specifics; he refers to "some modern scholars" saying one thing "though other historians remain skeptical"—and then gives a footnote referencing only Daniel Caner (112).[3] Caner is a tremendous scholar, but has not yet achieved multiplicity. Ward may very well be right about such points, but his obliquity simply clouds both evidence and theoretical framework. In the end his whole argument resembles a mirage: it shimmers from a distance with exciting possibility, but on examination one finds only shifting sands.

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[3] Specifically to Caner 2009: 144–145, where Caner does discuss the relevant debates.