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H.A. Drake, A Century of Miracles: Christians, Pagans, Jews, and the Supernatural, 312-410. [Book review]

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H. A. Drake, *A Century of Miracles: Christians, Pagans, Jews, and the Supernatural, 312-410*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

H. A. Drake is research professor of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara and well known for his scholarship on Emperor Constantine and the Christianisation of the Roman Empire. He is, for example, the author of the magisterial *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (2000) and the editor of *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices* (2006). The topic of Drake's *A Century of Miracles: Christians, Pagans, Jews, and the Supernatural, 312-410* is not miracles as such, but rather the accounts about miracles in the fourth century CE and the ways in which people used these stories to explain the rapid religious changes that took place during this century. In the early fourth century, Christians were a minority, but by the end of the century, even though they were still a minority, they had grown in numbers and were now fashioning a Christian Roman Empire. Drake builds the narrative arch of the book from Emperor Constantine's miracle before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 to Emperor Theodosius' miracle at the Battle of the Frigidus in 394. Underlying these miracles there was the belief that supernatural support was available to individuals who gained divine favour. The focus is on what Drake calls "imperial miracles". The final ending point of the story, however, is the sack of Rome in 410, an event that was conspicuous for its lack of miracles. This disaster called for an explanation as by this time the Christian God was expected to keep the Empire safe. Augustine in *The City of God* took the challenge to explicate new ideas about the importance of private individuals' miracles, not those that affected empires and states, and this ended the century of miracles.

Drake begins with an important discussion on historians and the miraculous in Chapter 1. What is a miracle? The historians' interest is in using tales of miracles to understand the world in which these stories were composed. That is, as Drake writes, these "events are shaped as much by what people think happened as by what actually did happen" (p. 9). In Chapter 2, he starts to unwind the century from the last of the imperial miracles, namely the victory of Theodosius I at the Frigidus due to a miraculous storm. This was soon interpreted as divine intervention on behalf of the

pious Christian emperor. As with so many other incidents, the miracle grew with the telling, as with Ambrose's speech commemorating the deceased emperor or the church historians Rufinus of Aquileia and Theodoret of Cyrrhus. Drake also shows how bishops took control of miracle stories and used them to reinforce their own agendas.

Theodosius' miracle was an echo of the more remarkable miracle of Constantine at the Milvian Bridge, an event that has intrigued scholars for centuries. In Chapter 3, Drake revisits the questions of what Constantine saw, when he saw it, what it all meant, by analysing the famous accounts of Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea and contextualising Constantine's vision with the continuities of late Roman political ideology. Drake also reminds us of Constantine's "pagan vision" in the panegyric in 310 and convincingly explains that "the obvious explanation for all the discrepancies" between the accounts of his vision "is that his own understanding changed over the years" (p. 65). Christians shared with pagans the premises according to which life on earth was the reflection of a cosmic order and divinity intervened in the affairs in the human sphere. In Chapter 4, Drake argues that Constantine's miracle was also hijacked by Christian writers, especially Lactantius and Eusebius. Drake skilfully shows how Eusebius treated Constantine's claim to enjoy a special relationship with God in different ways in different contexts. While Constantine was still alive, Eusebius in his laudatory speeches cherished an idea of the emperor's direct contact with God. After Constantine's death, Eusebius implies in *Life of Constantine* that the channel to the divine was no longer direct, for the emperor needed religious specialists – clerical tutors – to advise him. Consequently, Eusebius set limits to Constantine's authority.

Chapter 5 discusses the discovery of that most sacred of relics to Christians, the cross. Drake analyses the fourth-century accounts of the discovery of the cross and its connection to Constantine's mother Helena. Ambrose's funeral oration to Theodosius is the first mention that gives Helena a role in the discovery. What has enthralled scholars is that in *Life of Constantine* Eusebius describes the discovery of the Holy Sepulchre but does not make any mention of the discovery of the cross. It was only later writers such as Rufinus who added the story of Helena and the cross. During the fourth century, the cult of the cross grew rapidly and Helena's part along with it. Chapter 6 examines the

role of Jews in late antique miracle narratives such as the Helena legend. These stories both shaped and reflected Christian attitudes towards the Jews. Drake also discusses three Christian writers who were critical of the Jews: Epiphanius of Salamis in *The Medicine Chest (The Panarion)*, Ambrose in connection to the infamous Callinicum incident, and John Chrysostom in his homilies. John Chrysostom's assaults were targeted less at the Jews themselves and more at those Christians who participated in Jewish festivals, and as Drake rightly points out, "much of this rhetoric was prompted by the fluid state of religious identity" (p. 128). Drake reminds us that words such as John Chrysostom's polemic have consequences: "The way this anti-Judaism morphed into something else, the religious hatred of anti-Semitism, is a sobering reminder of the unintended consequences" (p. 132).

Chapter 7, "Miracle in the Desert", looks at late antique martyrs and ascetics, focusing on Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, and the immense power channelled through a person. Drake gives a short survey on the recent research on martyr narratives and concludes that many stories about martyrs were heavily embroidered and many of them were completely fabricated (though some weren't), but their impact on the Christian imagination was significant. The martyr stories in particular maintained what Drake calls a Christian "persecution complex" (p. 143) long after persecutions that might have justified feelings of victimisation had ended. Stories even became a means to justify Christian maltreatment of others. Miracles also functioned as proof of one's superiority in religious competition, as Drake discusses in Chapter 8. The miracles of Pope Silvester were greater than those of the rabbis in the *Acts of Silvester*, and Peter the Apostle's were greater than Simon Magus' in the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*. The holy men and miracles of rivals were found doubtful. In his war of words, Emperor Julian questioned the reverence that Christians showed to their martyrs ("corpses newly dead"). Likewise, in the controversy over the altar of Victory, which Drake aptly calls "something of a political football" (p. 173), the language of miracles was also the language of power. Opponents' miracles were either fakes or failures. In Chapter 9, we see how Lactantius in *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* composed a rigorous narrative of Emperor Galerius' death in 311 and stresses how important it is for a modern student of late antique literature to fully understand the role of rhetoric in these sources.

Christian storytellers also did their best to interpret Julian's two great failures – his failed attempt to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem and his death in the battlefield during the campaign against Persia in 363 – as divine retribution.

In Chapter 10, the century of miracles ends with the sack of Rome and the lack of miracles. The Christian belief that they would be protected by their God was being shaken as pagans (and many Christians as well) could interpret the fall of Rome in 410 as proof that the Christian deity was not protecting the Empire: “By the standards of the day, Alaric's victory amounted to a complete and utter failure of the Christian God to do his job” (p. 200). Drake refers to the ability of Christianity to survive this signal failure (and many others thereafter) and the “the agility with which Christian thinkers reworked the rules” (p. 200). The most renowned to do this was Augustine in *The City of God*. Augustine did not forsake miracles altogether but he replaced imperial miracles, for example, in the battle fields, with private miracles of individual people, which he saw as more important.

A Century of Miracles is a pleasant read. Drake knows how to combine scholarly discussion with an accessible and at times punchy style (“The *Life of Antony* hit the Mediterranean world like a tsunami”, p. 141) and lively comparisons are made with modern issues. The miracle stories are contextualised with the late antique history in general, discussions ranging from the relations between emperors and bishops; questioning the dichotomies of pagans and Christians; the problem of the Constantinian turn; the debates on Julian's School Law, and so on. This reader sometimes wondered how certain accounts and details that Drake introduced were related to the overall theme but then – with a nice miraculous switch – Drake succeeded in once again weaving his narrative and argument together.