

SUMMARY

Four historians of Christian literature: from Jerome to Ildefons

An important part of the history of ancient christian literature are attempts to write its history. The founder of the tradition was Jerome of Stridon with his work *De viris illustribus*, followed by Gennadius of Marseilles, Isidore of Seville and Ildefons of Toledo. Comparison of the four authors reveals the continuity and “canonicity” of the genre, as well as its transformations relative to their geographical, professional and personal backgrounds.

Jerome conjoins the tradition of ancient “pagan” biography with an apologetic agenda. From Suetonius he borrows the structure of a profile, but, unlike him, does not include biographical anecdotes. The monotony of the text is a mark of haste, or of an intention to suppress the individuality of the author and to create the impression of the homogenous stream of the church literature.

In the Latin West, Jerome’s work has become a work in progress of sorts, a never-ending story, to which new authors were added by later historians of literature. Under the veil of a dry “canonic” text, different authorial strategies emerge.

Jerome is guided by his personal sympathies and antipathies. The central role in the history of Christian literature, as he composes it, is given to personalities who prefigure Jerome’s own struggles (Tertullian, Origen), and it culminates in an extensive self-portrait.

In contrast, Gennadius does not accentuate himself. His history is biased in the sense that he prefers monastic authors, especially those of the Lerinian faction. But he describes the style of his authors more cautiously; he is a much more ‘positivistic’ scholar.

Isidore writes his text *in margine* of his main work, and it is little more than a compilation from available sources. Finally, Ildefons is a medieval bishop, a local patriot, who wants to celebrate his hometown and his predecessors, including those who did not write. In his hands, *De viris illustribus* ceases to be a history of literature and becomes an anthology of biographies of the important men of the church.

With Ildefons the tradition ends, not to be followed before the High Middle Ages. Modern continuation of Jerome’s method is a discipline called patrology for which the literary quality of the selected works has but a marginal significance.