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*Sacred Founders: Women, Men, and Gods in the Discourse of  
Imperial Founding, Rome through Early Byzantium* by Diliaana  
N. Angelova (review)

Vasileios Marinis

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The contribution of this volume will be to make all of us think again about what we believe we know of the origins of Christian office.

*Geoffrey D. Dunn, Australian Catholic University*

Diliana N. Angelova

*Sacred Founders: Women, Men, and Gods in the Discourse of Imperial Founding, Rome through Early Byzantium*

Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015

Pp. xiv + 434. \$75.00.

The cumbersome title should not deter scholars from reading this fine book carefully. In it Angelova investigates the discourse of “sacred founders” as a means of legitimizing imperial authority. At the center of this discourse lie Emperor Constantine I and his mother Helena, who, according to Angelova, were viewed by later Byzantines as the founders of the Christian Roman Empire and thus became models for later sovereigns. The book is divided into three parts, comprising ten chapters in total, along with the requisite Introduction and Conclusion. The first part (“The Founding Discourses of Imperial Rome,” Chapters 1–3) investigates the origins and precedents of the discourse from the Roman imperial era in the figures of Livia and Augustus. Part II (“Christian Transformations,” Chapters 4–7) is dedicated to Constantine and Helena, as well as to their immediate successors and other patrons belonging to aristocratic families. The third part (“Christianity and the Founding Discourse,” Chapters 8–10) considers the early Christian bishops’ adaptation and reinterpretation of this discourse.

Throughout the book Angelova aptly combines a deep knowledge of pertinent written sources with innovative analysis of an impressive array of material culture, including buildings, monumental decoration, ivories, and coins. This is not an easy feat. In a field that has, since the nineteenth century, been dominated by a partiality toward texts at the expense of any other kind of evidence, Angelova’s assertion that written material is “a category of statements, among others from different sources—visual, archaeological, architectural, and so forth—in a broader discourse” (262), though not exactly revolutionary, is commendable.

Angelova offers a carefully constructed argument, and her presentation and analysis of the evidence is meticulous. She revisits many old issues with a fresh eye—Constantine I’s enduring connection with Apollo, the identification of the figures in the mosaic in the triumphal arch of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, and the meaning of the imperial panels in San Vitale in Ravenna—putting forward many plausible interpretations. Most importantly, she sheds new light on the history of imperial and aristocratic women from the early Byzantine period, not in the usual perfunctory manner, but with great deliberation. I suppose that other reviewers will view her lack of a specific theoretical framework as surprising; I, on the other hand, consider Angelova’s strict adherence to the pragmatic analysis of the evidence quite refreshing.

Despite the numerous merits of Angelova's study, her predilection for interpreting everything as connected to a founders discourse, often accompanied by cursory dismissals of the opinions of both contemporary scholars and ancient authors, is sometimes nettlesome and requires logical acrobatics that render some of her arguments unpersuasive (see, for example, the connection between Livia and Hersilia, 74–75). In some cases, what Angelova considers to be acts that elevate a figure to a sacred founder may be interpreted simply as the acts of imperial and aristocratic sponsorship of public buildings and the continuation of long established traditions (this is particularly evident in Chapter Five, "Constantine's and Helena's Legacy in the Organization of Public Space"). Furthermore, Angelova's arguments are sometimes based on tenuous evidence: Helena *may* have been the "likely initiator" of the Sessorian complex renovations (136–37) and she *may* have been the patron of the Basilica of SS. Marcellinus and Peter (137–40), although neither is certain. Yet, both these "exemplary actions" of Helena are eventually considered to be undisputable facts, on which further assertions are built.

The book is carefully copyedited and beautifully produced. Its illustrations, although in black and white, are clear and appropriately placed. There are, however, some minor annoyances, which, I suspect, are the fault of the press, such as endnotes—which, unfortunately, have become ubiquitous. When combined with an author-date citation system, however, they make the hunt for a reference a major enterprise (I am guilty of the same sin). Then, there are also some peculiar conventions: thus, Alexander the Great reigned 336–23 B.C.E.

Angelova's study will be useful to both students and scholars who seek a well-informed and balanced history of founding discourses from imperial Rome to early Byzantium. Even though it is likely that the author's overarching thesis will not persuade everyone, the excellence of the book, thankfully, lies elsewhere.

*Vasileios Marinis, Yale University*

Lincoln H. Blumell and Thomas A. Wayment, editors  
*Christian Oxyrhynchus: Texts, Documents, and Sources*  
 Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015  
 Pp. 778, \$89.95.

Christian origins and New Testament enthusiasts will encounter within this volume the primary surviving Greek papyri from Oxyrhynchus, the Egyptian darling-child of every papyrologist and the principal source of Greco-Roman era manuscripts. Whereas editors have compiled various anthologies of texts, translations and images of ancient Christian literature, this monograph capitalizes on the systematic excavation and publication of the ancient city's papyri in a defined-yet-comprehensive survey of ancient material culture and literature, selecting witnesses to the city's Christian legacy. In terms of the total papyrological picture, one could contextualize the current collection by noting that "53 of