

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

BYZANTINE AND MODERN GREEK STUDIES

XYGALATAS (D.) **The Burning Saints: Cognition and Culture in the Fire-Walking Rituals of the Anastenaria.** Sheffield: Equinox, 2012. Pp. xii + 253, illus. £60. 9781845539764.
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Preparations made from coal tar have been used to treat dermatological conditions for over 2,000 years. Such ointments contain over a thousand different compounds, and doctors still prescribe them without knowing exactly how they work. The Anastenaria, a healing cult found in northern Greece, has been performed for generations yet how it works has also remained mysterious. Loring Danforth contends in his 1989 volume on the subject (*Firewalking and Religious Healing*, Princeton), that the Anastenaria involves religious healing. A condition of illness is expressed as the painful calling of St Constantine and then dramatized through the public performance of dance and firewalking, and thereby transformed into a beneficial state of saintly grace and health. In *The Burning Saints*, Xygalatas goes well beyond symbolic anthropology into the domains of cognitive and evolutionary psychology to reveal manifold further operative factors that might account for the effectiveness of the Anastenaria.

As the author points out, the majority of participants in the Anastenaria have very little explanation for why they joined the cult, what the ritual means or why firewalking figures in it. They begin with a sense of dysphoria and then, impelled by instructions received in dreams or acting on spontaneous impulse, they find themselves dancing in the *konaki* (the Anastenarides' meeting place) and over hot coals before the public. The group as a whole has no settled aetiological narrative for its custom. Some say that the church in their ancestral village of Kostí in Bulgaria (refugees carried the ritual to Greece in the early 20th century) caught fire and people carried the icons to safety out of the flames. Others say that God set the task of walking over fire in order to select a representative. Constantine managed

successfully and then a woman named Eleni accomplished the feat and became his wife (historically, Eleni was Constantine the Great's mother). Not to have settled on a history for such an unusual ritual is surprising.

The first half of this book offers a highly readable and well-informed account of the Anastenaria based upon the author's extensive fieldwork over the last decade. It is now the most convenient and up-to-date source for anyone who wants to learn about this subject. The second half of the book delves into the biological realm. It is unfailingly interesting, but humanist readers will have to decide how useful they find such data. To know that all humans are prone to some level of obsessive-compulsive disorder and that religious rituals tap into this propensity is not sufficient for understanding why the Anastenaria continues to exist. As James Laidlaw has pointed out ('A well-disposed humanist's problems with the "cognitive science of religion"', in H. Whitehouse and J. Laidlaw (eds), *Religion, Anthropology and Cognitive Science*, Durham NC 2007) cognitivism provides an account of remote, basic causes, but religious practices take shape and meaning in more proximate social and historical contexts. An understanding of the properties of gesso does not allow one to 'explain' the themes and meanings of Giotto's paintings – but it is not irrelevant either.

According to the author: 'Humans are cultural, and historical, and psychological, and biological agents, and to negate any one aspect of their existence is to be blind to a large portion of their nature, in essence dehumanizing the very subject of anthropology, human beings' (191). I sympathize with this vision, and I found it very useful to learn that walking on hot coals causes increased heart rate and that dancing can propel one into a trance with accompanying hallucinations. The heightened state of arousal generated by firewalking stimulates the release of adrenaline, endorphins and dopamine that increase the sense of wellbeing. They can also act as entheogens, inflected by local cultural assumptions into experiences of seeing and hearing the saint. The release of these brain chemicals may (at least temporarily) overcome the conditions of anxiety and depression

that drive people to become participants in the first place. The initially marginalized participants have their confidence restored, their dysphoria ameliorated and their social esteem increased. They are brought from isolation back into social relations. Yes, then, the Anastenaria works at the social and psychological levels to heal, and the community has continued to perform it although it does not classify it as a healing ritual, but more as an all-

purpose devotion to the saint. The key contribution of this book is its examination of the various psychobiological factors, which, like the multiple compounds in tar, underlie therapeutic effectiveness.

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