THE SENSE OF A STYLITE:
PERSPECTIVES ON SIMEON THE ELDER*

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I

There have been few figures to emerge in Christian history so compelling and unnerving as Simeon the Elder, the first of what would prove to be a long tradition of pillar saints.1 Just as Antony of Egypt has provided the model by which the emergence of the Christian monastic movement has traditionally been approached, Simeon has been seen to represent both the archetypal holy man of late antiquity and the idiosyncratic extremes to which the ascetic movement could go in its early centuries.

Born into a prosperous Christian family in northern Syria around 386, Simeon tended his father’s sheep until a sudden religious conversion turned him to an ascetic career. He passed through two monasteries, at Tel’ada and Telneshe, but his propensity for severe and eccentric practice led him into conflict with the developing Syrian monastic structure. Eventually, Simeon went his own way, first as a recluse and then as a stylite (from the Greek *styllos*, meaning “pillar”) mounting the first of three successive pillars, each higher than the one before. On the pillar he took up his *stasis*, his stance of continual prayer.2 The final pillar, on which he spent roughly the last forty years of his life, was about forty cubits high (sixty feet?) with a platform on top about six feet square. Exposed on a mountain with no shelter of any kind, Simeon stood on his pillar midway between heaven and earth until his death in 459 at the age of more than seventy years. His career as holy man had been spectacular: his fame had spread from Britain to Persia; the pilgrims who flocked to see him crossed the spectrum of late antique society from peasant to emperor, bringing him problems as mundane as cucumber crops and as complex as foreign policy.3
Two monuments raised in honor of Simeon deserve particular attention. The first is physical: the magnificent building complex of Qal‘at Sim‘an, the church and monastic structure erected on Simeon’s mountain to house the relic of his pillar. The complex remains something of a mystery. We possess no literary data on its construction, and thus nothing of who built it or what ideas were in mind. The church itself is a cruciform martyrion with an octagonal center at the heart of which stood the pillar. Built between 476 and 490, Qal‘at Sim‘an is perhaps the greatest architectural achievement of the Christian east for the fifth century, a church unparalleled in Syria for size, beauty, and workmanship, and whose ruins continue to dazzle the modern visitor. As a major site of pilgrimage in the generations following Simeon’s death, it significantly influenced not only the religious and artistic culture of late antiquity, but the economy of Syria as well.

The second monument is perhaps more thought-provoking. The legacy of Simeon’s vocation was taken up after his death by others who chose to imitate his practice, and it spread throughout the Byzantine realm. In greater and lesser numbers as the centuries went by, stylites continued this same prayer practice up through the mid-nineteenth century. What Simeon started was no passing fad.

Modern scholarship has dealt with Simeon in three contexts. First, the literary texts have been analyzed with the intention of finding the ‘historical Simeon’—who he was and what happened—and ascertaining the relations between the separate traditions. Second, considerable effort has gone, more recently, on the examination of Simeon’s cult both in Syria and abroad, with primary attention to the non-literary evidence. Third, scholars have sought to place Simeon within the tradition of Syrian asceticism in particular, and the monastic movement of late antiquity in general. Lacking any written sources from Simeon’s own hand, we have tried to establish the historicity of the information available to us. In our concern for the historical, for what happened, we have neglected to consider the significant divergences in how Simeon’s own contemporaries made sense of him—their varied perspectives on the why.

We possess three major hagiographical sources for Simeon: Theodoret of Cyrrhos’ Historia Religiosa, chapter 26, written during the saint’s lifetime; the Syriac vita by Simeon’s disciples, written shortly after the saint’s death; and the Greek vita by Antonios, allegedly another disciple, whose account seems also to contain material from Simeon’s monastic community.