

BOOK REVIEW

Orosius and the Rhetoric of History. By PETER VAN NUFFELEN. Oxford Early Christian Studies. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. 252. £60.00/\$110.00. ISBN 978-0-19-965527-4.

Orosius and the Rhetoric of History is an exciting book about the fifth-century CE historian Orosius, an author who very rarely evokes excitement. Van Nuffelen provides not only a reevaluation of the nature and purpose of Orosius' seven-book *Historiae adversus paganos*, but also sets a productive new direction for future work in the Christian authors of late antiquity.

It has always been difficult to classify Orosius among late antique historians. He is not a breviarist like Eutropius, or a historian of the church, like Eusebius, but his focus on the distant past and his Christian apologetics differentiate him from a pagan historian like Ammianus. Scholars have often concluded that he was not really a historian at all, but rather a theologian of history, offering a triumphalist vision of Christian empire.

In contrast to this traditional "theological" reading, Van Nuffelen argues for a "rhetorical" reading, which includes the study of Orosius' use of literary allusion and other elements of eloquence, and also Orosius' direct engagement with the *exempla*-tradition of the rhetorical schools. When Orosius is read rhetorically, we can see that he is not a radical innovator but a classicizing historian after all, in the mold not of Ammianus or Tacitus, but of the "tragic" Hellenistic historians.

Orosius and the Rhetoric of History argues for the historian's classicism in two ways. First, Van Nuffelen demonstrates that scholars have failed to recognize Orosius' extensive use of traditional historiographical tropes. Second, he argues that the apparently unusual features of the text which have dominated the critical commentary can actually be assimilated to traditional historiography.

The earlier chapters of the book are dominated by demonstrations of Orosius' use of allusion and *exempla*. In the first chapter, Van Nuffelen shows how the historian uses Vergilian allusions in his preface as a purposeful literary strategy to enhance his authority. Intertextual engagement with Vergil is also highlighted in Chapter 2; in particular, Orosius' linguistic parallels with Vergilian descriptions of the fall of Troy serve to remind the reader that Rome would have

shared Troy's fate in the recent sack if not for God's help. In Chapter 3, Van Nuffelen emphasizes Orosius' use of classical, rather than Christian, *exempla*. The historian aims to defeat his rivals on their own turf, by contrasting negative *exempla* drawn from Roman rhetorical practice with the more commonly deployed positive *exempla*. In Chapter 4, Van Nuffelen makes it clear that Orosius is not a simple transcriber of his sources. Instead, he amplifies, conflates, and at times distorts sources for his own purposes.

More bold are Van Nuffelen's attempts to show that those elements of the *Historiae* which have been traditionally considered striking innovations can better be interpreted as variations of classicizing themes. For example, in the beginning of Book 2, Orosius offers his own version of the "four empires" theory found in other Christian works. Van Nuffelen argues that the extensive but somewhat incoherent parallels Orosius proposes between Rome and Babylon should be understood in the context of earlier examples of synchronism, such as that of Timaeus between east and west Greeks. The panegyric elements at the end of Orosius' work, Van Nuffelen argues in Chapter 6, do not present a radical new vision of Christian empire, as has been suggested. Instead, the use of panegyric in late antique historiography is typical, and Orosius' innovation lies only in Christianizing its subject. Van Nuffelen also shows in Chapter 7 that Orosius' claims of universalism are more rhetorical than realistic, and do not represent a new, Christianized view of history. The *Historiae* remain strongly Romanocentric, and while the figure of the barbarian is used at times to "destabilize" the perspective of the audience, Orosius' manipulation of the barbarian to achieve his narrative aims is not uncommon in late antique historiography.

Sometimes Van Nuffelen seems too intent on denying the unusual features of Orosius' work. The Christianization of traditional historiographical elements and the theological presuppositions that undergird the work do point the way to a new type of history. But Van Nuffelen is convincing in his systematic argument for the importance of reading Orosius as a classical historian, not as a Christian apologist. He shows that Orosius' explicit insistence that he would not to rely on biblical authority but would remain within limits of classical historiography (1.1, 7.1) is more than mere rhetoric. Students and scholars of all periods of ancient historiography have much to learn from this important book.

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