

BOOK REVIEW

Prudentius and the Landscapes of Late Antiquity. By CILLIAN O'HOGAN. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 224. Hardcover, \$100.00. ISBN 978-0-19-874922-6.

The sharp rise in interest in Late Antique literature over the last decades produced a great growth in publications and scientific initiatives, such as meetings and conferences. Cillian O'Hogan's fine book on Prudentius' conception and description of landscape falls within the framework of this 'revival' of Late Antiquity, and adds his own contribution to deepening Christian ideas and view of the world that find expression in poetry.

In chapter 1 (*Reading as a Journey*, 9–34) the author begins by reading Prudentius' *Peristephanon* as an attempt to enable the reader to experience the places of pilgrimage by reading their description rather than by traveling and visiting them. Prudentius thus promotes the power of the written word, in the wake of classical authors, such as Horace (notably *Carm.* 3.30) and Ovid (*scil.* at the conclusion of the *Metamorphoses*, 15.871–879), who emphasize the primacy of poetry over physical markers, since the former is more long lasting than the latter.

The metaphor of the 'book of nature', as the outcome of the parallel between the world and a book that is widespread among Christian writers such as Augustine and Gregory of Nazianzus, has significant influence on Prudentius, as well. All is fine, up to this point. O'Hogan then deals with the varying orders of the poems of the *Peristephanon* in the manuscript tradition and aims to explain this issue by the different interests of early readers. He argues in particular that the arrangement of the poems in the group of manuscripts known as 'βa' follows a "geographical organizing principle," insofar as such order seems to fit an itinerary beginning in northern Spain, moving down the Italian peninsula and reaching north Africa, before moving back to Italy and to Spain. According to O'Hogan, this arrangement of the poems can be considered as the result of the work of an editor, who intended to organize the collection as a consistent itinerary of pilgrimage. In my view, this ingenious argument is not adequately demonstrated.

Chapter 2 (*Intertextual Journeys*, 35–70) is about (a specific kind of) intertextuality in Prudentius' *Peristephanon*. O'Hogan comments on the reminiscences of

literary journeys, and especially those of Virgil's *Aeneid*, within the tales of the journeys of Eulalia and the pilgrim in Per. 3, 9 and 11: he fully achieves the purpose of showing that travel poetry, and notably Prudentius' poetry on pilgrimage, is highly 'literary'. The representation of the city in the works of Prudentius is the subject of chap. 3 (*Urban Space and Roman History*, 71–97), which begins with a survey of ideas and attitudes expressed by early Christian writers towards Roman Empire and civic community. In the *Peristephanon*, martyrs are presented as saviors of urban people: the association of martyr and city, which particularly stands out in the beginnings and endings of the hymns, is well highlighted by a close analysis of poetic structure and language. Besides, O'Hogan draws attention on the description of communal celebrations of the martyrs in the urban space, which enhances their relationship with the city. On the other side, the leading position of the martyr actually overshadows the urban space and pushes the city itself into the background. The tendency to efface the real world is further developed in the *Psichomachia*, where the battle between Virtues and Vices takes place in a deliberately vague landscape: this is a consequence and evidence of Prudentius' concerns with the transience of earthly world.

Chapter 4 (*Pastoral and Rural Spaces*, 99–131) moves from the city to the countryside, in order to explore Prudentius' representation of nature, as well as his interpretation of pastoral as a literary genre in a Christian perspective. It begins with a discussion of the relationship between Latin pastoral and Christian thought, focusing on the key figure of the "good shepherd" and on Virgil's Eclogue 4 "as a possible messianic text". Maybe the last point is not properly developed, since O'Hogan does not take account of the extensive bibliography on this subject.

The analysis of the relationship envisaged by Prudentius between religion and farm work in his *Contra orationem Symmachi*, with a considerable shift from traditional Roman literary description of farming, works much better: O'Hogan, indeed, succeeds in showing how the poet rejects Symmachus' arguments in favor of pagan rites and outlines a portrait of the ideal farmer, who finds solace in Christian faith. Going forward, O'Hogan concentrates on the description of paradise in the *Cathemerinon*, which can be seen as a development of the widespread topos of the *locus amoenus* and, more specifically, of the classical myth of the Golden Age. Prudentius' paradisiacal landscape does not correspond to any real place, but feeds off a deep appreciation of the miracle of Creation and the beauty of earthly nature: ultimately, the poet uses the description of paradise as a means of representing spatially the triumph of Christianity.

The last chapter ("Describing Art," 133–164) is about Prudentius' description of works of art and architecture, mainly churches consecrated to martyrs. The poet does not seem to trust the didactical and edifying power of Christian art: he raises the issue of interpreting the images rather than letting them speak for themselves. Indeed the O'Hogan speaks of "ambiguity" of art, which might be misleading to the viewers, according to Prudentius. As for the architecture, the poet subtly calls into question the appropriateness of such sumptuous buildings in a religion based on simplicity and humility.

The book opens with an introduction (1–8) that presents (too succinctly, to be fair) the *status quaestionis*, as well as the plan of the work. A not exhaustive bibliography, an *index locorum* and a 'general index' follow the short conclusion (165–166), which summarizes Prudentius' bookish approach to places and landscape, an approach that builds on the primacy of the written word over the earthly world. In sum, despite some minor weaknesses, the book as a whole is valuable and rich of interesting points.

GIAMPIERO SCAFOGLIO

Université de Nice Sophia Antipolis, Giampiero.SCAFOGLIO@unice.fr