

## BOOK REVIEW

*Inscribing Faith in Late Antiquity: Between Reading and Seeing.* By SEAN V. LEATHERBURY. Image, Text, and Culture in Classical Antiquity. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor, and Francis Group, 2020. Pp. xvii + 366. Hardback, \$155.00. ISBN 978-1-4724-5918-3.

*Inscribing Faith* is panoramic: reaching from the British Isles to the Euphrates and from the Constantinian apse of Rome's Old St. Peter's to a mid-eight century floor mosaic in the Church of the Virgin in Madaba (Jordan); embracing floor and wall mosaics, paintings, stone carvings, graffiti and metalwork; and treating with equanimity the several religious traditions that cultivated the late antique epigraphic habit. The study's stated aims are to place late antique building inscriptions (primarily) within their "spatial, visual, religious, and cultural contexts," to honor but challenge the religious categories—Christian, Jewish and Islamic—that typically isolate them one from another in specialized works and to treat inscriptions holistically as key but single components of grander textual-visual ensembles (4-5). Other scholars are also now exploring this fertile borderland between texts and images, but few have set out with such an ambitious agenda. Consequently, Sean Leatherbury has produced a volume that yields new perspectives and establishes a paradigm for future study while also synthesizing a vast array of scholarship.

Most of the evidence treated in *Inscribing Faith* comes from Christian contexts, especially the basilicas and martyr shrines that came to dominate the religious topography of the Mediterranean and Near East after the fourth century, but synagogues and mosques enjoy attention as well. The evidence is uneven, of course, a point well illustrated by the disproportionate survival of floor mosaics in the eastern Mediterranean and of wall mosaics in the Latin west. Even so there are common themes, and chapters attend to a range of issues that span the tangible, literary and spiritual dimensions of the kinds of late antique inscriptions that most often appear in association with figural and non-figural imagery. It is one of the welcome by-products of this study, therefore, that it not only demonstrates how varied were the epigraphic practices of late antiquity but that it also spotlights those shared features that bridged time and place.

Throughout Leatherbury highlights the self-conscious materiality of inscribed texts, a physicality emphasized, for example, both by the brilliant red and gold lettering that patrons and craftsmen preferred and by the frequent use of verbs denoting sparkling and shimmering to describe the mosaics and walls upon which those very words were written. Thereby context and content elide as the language of light simultaneously serves physical and spiritual registers. This slippage between materiality and immateriality, acknowledged by some contemporaries, is inherent in many of the texts discussed by Leatherbury and it found outlets, he emphasizes, in multiple ways. The visual framing of epigraphic texts often straddled the realistic and the symbolic, adapting the classical *tabula ansata* and *clipeus* to new secular and religious contexts while also deploying more novel object frames, such as crosses and architectural facades, in order both to indulge visual-verbal games and to heighten viewers' experience of sacred space. Frames, Leatherbury demonstrates, communicated both independently of the texts they contained and in tandem with them, simultaneously "isolating" texts in the midst of busy visual fields and "inviting" readers into the distinct textual matrices they demarcated (93). Ekphrastic epigrams were especially adept at enticing readers to experience the space around them, encouraging not only the close observation of associated imagery and architecture but also the viewers' physical movement in ways that often replicated liturgical circuits. Such "active inscriptions" (162) frequently utilized first and second person voicings to capitalize upon the sense of wonder created by resplendent interior spaces and to redirect that awe to spiritual and honorific ends. Finally, Leatherbury considers two categories of "embedding": the traditional *titulus*, an inscription, often in verse, associated with a pictorial image; and the embedded prayer. Many of the themes treated in earlier chapters, ekphrasis and epigraphically guided motion, for example, necessarily remerge in these chapters since every inscription works along multiple vectors, but Leatherbury underscores the ways in which the close pairing of texts and figural images tended to clarify and complicate interpretation while nudging viewers toward symbolic or metaphorical readings. This is no less true of epigrams associated with wall mosaics in the west than of the biblical paraphrases more common in eastern floor mosaics, which typically accompanied select Old Testament scenes (e.g., Abraham and Isaac). Such *tituli* were not simply labels. Rather they enriched images with further layers of meaning as they "amplified" viewer experience (227). So, too, inscriptions and graffiti that replicated or encouraged their viewers' prayers often ushered their audience from material to immaterial realms.

On such a vast canvas, the brush does occasionally slip. The “fiery platform” upon which the figure of Agnes in the apse of S. Agnese f.l.m. is said to stand (200), for example, is actually a sword flaked by flame bursts; both physical and documentary evidence (e.g., T. Lehmann, *ZPE* 91 [1992] 255-8; T. Lehmann, *Paulinus Nolanus und die Basilica Nova* [2004] 238) do show that Paulinus of Nola’s epigram composed for the apse of Cimitile’s Basilica Nova was indeed inscribed therein (197-8); and Damasus’s epigrams number rather more than eighteen (256). Nevertheless, *Inscribing Faith*’s lavishly illustrated pages (no small undertaking for author and press) bathe images and texts in clarifying new light while guiding readers through a wonderland of late antique monuments. Sean Leatherbury never downplays the difficulties of reconstructing the experience of the late ancient viewer but in this wide-ranging study he has provided some of our best hope of sharing it.

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