

## PRUDENTIUS WITHIN LATE ANTIQUITY

O'HOGAN (C.) *Prudentius and the Landscapes of Late Antiquity*. Pp. viii + 197. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Cased, £60, US\$100. ISBN: 978-0-19-874922-6.

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On the first page of the preface (p. v), O'H. explains that the volume is the revised version of his doctoral thesis written at the University of Toronto, and in the introduction he outlines, first, the deep change of views in Late Antiquity because of the rise of Christianity and the new ways in which people thought about the world as literature, and, second, a new

approach towards the poetry of Prudentius, which, according to O'H., is intensely concerned not only with questions of empire, cult-spaces and identity but also with the prominence of topographical and geographical themes.

Chapter 1, 'Reading as a Journey', focuses on the geography of reading. O'H. examines the Roman tendency to acquire knowledge by reading, and he suggests, for example, that Prudentius' *Peristephanon* functions as an attempt to provide a means for the readers to experience the sites of the cults of martyrs even though they have never visited them. One of the interesting points in the chapter is O'H.'s metaphor of the 'book of nature', used to explain how Prudentius could be interested in contemporary ideas about the world as a text, a *magnus liber* perfect in its construction, and how he could think of the reader as a traveller immersed in 'a literary world' (p. 7). O'H. highlights a remarkable connection between Prudentius' report in *Perist.* 1 (the hymn to Emeterius and Chelidonius) of the names of martyrs – which are written 'in gold in heaven' and 'in blood on earth' – and *tituli* and other paratextual features, which were often written in red ink in late-antique manuscripts (for example in the *Puteanus*, the oldest manuscript of Prudentius), so that 'the poem presents a reference to the materiality of its presentation' (p. 27). In the same way, it is interesting to note another correlation, namely the link between metrical *conspicuitas* and subject matter: Prudentius uses the Sapphic stanza in relation to the theme of travel, and this was also practised by Horace, who discusses travel in a number of poems in the same metre (see Hor. *Carm.* 1.22, 2.6, 3.14, 3.27 and 4.2 vs Prudent. *Perist.* 4 and *Cath.* 8).

In Chapter 2, 'Intertextual Journeys', O'H. pays particular attention to the text of Prudentius and to the intertextual aspect of literary journeys, arguing 'that Prudentius' descriptions of journeys are as much indebted to the literary tradition as they are to lived experience on the part of the narrator' (p. 7). He demonstrates that the pattern of Aeneas' epic journey in Virgil is used for emotional effect in *Perist.* 3 for the journey of Eulalia and in *Perist.* 9 and 11 for the journey of the pilgrim. In particular, the hymn to Eulalia is interesting for its hagiographical background of the account of the virgin martyr and for the number of its features that relate to urban space; however, the hymn's connection to Aeneas' trip into the Underworld in *Aen.* 6 seems evident in Eulalia's nocturnal journey from her imposed hiding place in the countryside to Emerita (*Perist.* 3.41–66), a journey that also echoes the forced departure of the Jews from Egypt in Exodus 14. In the last two sections of the chapter, O'H. discusses the eleventh hymn (the hymn to Hippolytus) and the ninth poem in the cycle, which is 'one of the few to employ a dramatic framing narrative' (p. 51). Through all three examples discussed in this chapter, O'H.'s aim is, above all, to demonstrate Prudentius' imitation of Virgilian poetic descriptions of journeys.

In Chapter 3, 'Urban Space and Roman History', O'H. discusses the representation of the city in Prudentius. Beginning with a survey of early Christian ideas about the city, O'H. demonstrates in an engaging manner Prudentius' approach to the civic nature of martyrdom, which in the *Peristephanon* is related to the contemporary Christian perception that earthly civic obligations are not incompatible with participation in the heavenly city of the afterlife, even if some tensions continue to exist. In particular, he argues that the beginnings and the endings of the hymns of the *Peristephanon* are concerned with the relationship between martyr and city, and he illustrates how Prudentius emphasises the close link that exists between the presence of a martyr's relics and the prowess of a city, with the result that we may observe in many of the concluding passages the communal aspect of the celebration of that martyr. According to this approach it is possible to discover a link between Prudentius' tendency to obliterate the real world in the *Peristephanon* and the undistinguished landscape of the *Psychomachia*.

Having discussed ‘Prudentius’ depiction of urban spaces and how the martyrs of the *Peristephanon* are presented as local heroes analogous to city founders’ (p. 99), in Chapter 4, ‘Pastoral and Rural Spaces’, O’H. turns from the city to the countryside and explores the representation of nature, farming and idealised pastoral in Prudentius’ poetry. He argues that, even though Prudentius’ careful depictions of heaven in the *Cathemerinon* and elsewhere cannot be mapped onto a specific physical space, these imagined landscapes are, nonetheless, fundamental to an understanding of Prudentius’ concept of space: Prudentius re-focuses the traditional genre of pastoral poetry and the conventional picture of the idealised countryside as seen from the city and embraces the Christian ideas of heaven as a similarly idealised space. Special attention is given to the *De mortibus boum* of Endecheius, most probably a contemporary of Prudentius, in which Christ is represented as intervening in the pastoral landscape in order to protect the flocks of the faithful. O’H. then shows Prudentius’ idea of divine intervention, which is different from that depicted by Endecheius.

In Chapter 5, ‘Describing Art’, O’H. turns to Prudentius’ descriptions of constructed spaces, that is, works of art and architecture, and especially churches set up in commemoration of the martyrs. O’H. argues, first, that Prudentius communicates to his readers that he is uneasy about the appropriateness of such sites of the visual arts as a reliable means of conveying information about the cult of the saints, and, second, that he tries to control the ambiguity of the images in *Perist.* 9 and 11 by giving a verbal description of the martyrdoms of Cassian and Hippolytus. O’H. moves on to examine Prudentius’ accounts of the churches set up in honour of Eulalia, Hippolytus, and Peter and Paul. In particular, when O’H. writes that ‘throughout, however, Prudentius sets out the primacy of the word (written or spoken) over art, and demonstrates how verbal interpretation always trumps visual representation’ (p. 135), I believe, as I have argued elsewhere (*‘Epigr. Bob. 45 Sp. [= Ps. Auson. 2 pp. 420 s. Peip.]’*: la palinodia di Didone negli *Epigrammata Bobiensia* e la sua rappresentazione iconica’, *Sileno* 41 [2015], esp. 298–301), that Prudentius’ way conforms to a typical use of ekphrasis, often attested in late-antique poetry, that is, ekphrasis *in visione*, according to which absent images are also represented to our minds so that we believe that we see them with our eyes and have them in front of us (see Quint. *Inst.* 6.2.29; Theon, *Progymn.* 118.7 p. 66 Patillon-Bolognesi; ps.-Hermog. *Progymn.* 10 p. 22 Rabe; Longin. *Subl.* 15.1). To comment on the supremacy of the word, we could think of a real competition between the ‘present’ poem and the ‘absent’ image (or *visio*).

I agree with O’H. when he argues at the end of the conclusion (pp. 165–6) that, if ‘an emphasis on the written word is, of course, characteristic of early Christian thought’, Prudentius is conscious that, in an imperfect world, even words are fallible, but ‘allusion and typology are ways of attempting to overcome this fallibility, by accumulating descriptions and narratives that ultimately point to underlying universal truths’.

The volume, which is concluded by a rich bibliography, a useful *index locorum* and a general index, is an important and valuable addition to Prudentian scholarship, which it advances substantially by offering fruitful opportunities to other scholars for further exploration of this topic in different directions.

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