

Paula Hershkowitz: *Prudentius, Spain, and Late Antique Christianity. Poetry, Visual Culture, and the Cult of Martyrs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017. XIII, 254 p., 29 ill., 1 map. £ 75.00. ISBN: 978-1-107-14960-1.

This welcome scholarly monograph by Paula Hershkowitz examines the relationship between the material culture of late antique Hispania and the poetry of Aurelius Prudentius Clemens. Over the course of six meticulous chapters dedicated to the intersection of literary and visual culture, she makes a useful contribution to our understanding of the achievement and historical circumstances of the foremost Latin poet of the medieval West, highlighting issues of methodology and the state of our knowledge of the archaeology of late antique Hispania. Attempting to situate the poet within his native landscape, she has done readers an immense service, and this work will be certain to stimulate further debate and inquiry.

With the first chapter (1–30: “An Introduction to Prudentius: A Spanish Poet for the Martyrs”), Hershkowitz provides readers with an introduction to Prudentius that squarely places him within the milieu of fourth-century Hispania. As Hershkowitz observes in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, Prudentius himself presents readers with a Spanish *ethos* in the poems of the *Peristephanon*, and that warrants a sustained effort to identify how Prudentius’ Spanish roots influenced and shaped his poetry (1–2). Remarks on methods and sources follow as Hershkowitz clearly indicates that she will eschew the approaches of past scholars with their emphasis upon literary shape and debts of Prudentius’ poetry, preferring instead to draw connections between the literary culture of Prudentius and the material culture of the world in which he lived (2–7: “Methodology and Sources”). Turning to the evidence of Prudentius for his biography, Hershkowitz offers a revisionist interpretation that nicely unites thorough coverage of the ancient sources with reference to the most recent work on this and related topics. Characteristic of this iconoclastic approach is her use of *Epilogus* to introduce her discussion of Prudentius’ life and career. The poet emerges as a Spaniard who probably came from the city of Calagurris in the northern valley of the Ebro river and was manifestly proud of his Hispanic roots. Presented as a villa-poet (which label will have resonance in the later attempt to link poetry to material culture), Prudentius seems clearly a member of the Western

bureaucracy who came to have a close attachment to the emperors Theodosius I and Honorius (7–17: “Prudentius on Himself”). The prosopographical and archaeological survey of settings within which Prudentius might have moved is then conducted in a manner reminiscent of the classic study of John F. Matthews¹. Impressionistic though this must be, the survey does a solid job of placing Prudentius within the context of Hispania and southwestern Gaul (17–29: “The Hispania of Prudentius: Historical Context”). Items such as the *Gallic Chronicle of AD 452*, the villa of La Olemda, and the works of Potamius of Olisipo are cited to illustrate in detail the late Roman, localised world of Prudentius. This programmatic introductory chapter concludes with a few words about what Hershkowitz intends to achieve in each of the following chapters (29–30: “Book Structure”). A focus upon what is distinctively local, visual, and material informs this essay in a new interpretation of the poetic work of Prudentius.

The second chapter examines the social and religious context for Prudentius’ poetry from the vantage-point of Hispania rather than – as has so often been the case – from that of the imperial court (31–75: “Prudentius’ Audience: Society and Religious Belief in Late Antique Hispania”). In view of the centrality of Hispania to the poetic work of Prudentius, that is an eminently sensible and persuasive opening gambit. Hershkowitz uses the *phalera* of Vareia to introduce issues such as a military presence upon the landscape and the common background of a Classical education that united Prudentius and his audience (31–34). Then Hershkowitz proceeds to establish both the likelihood that Prudentius belonged to a Christian community at or near to Calagurris and to illustrate the nature of such a community by means of the remains of material culture that have been brought to light in the excavation of villas in recent decades (34–43: “Identifying the Audience of the Villa-Poet”). The use of the literary evidence nicely situates Prudentius first and foremost within the landscape of Hispania, rather than at the imperial court, and conceivably suggests a readership in southern Gaul as well as Hispania. The Gallic evidence is slight in the work of Prudentius himself (indeed, Narbonne and Arles lay along the land route linking Hispania and Italia) and largely comes from the latter half of the fifth century; therefore, one might wonder whether this, too, was not an instance of the posthumous success

1 J. F. Matthews: *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court, A. D. 364–425*. Oxford 1975.

that Prudentius' oeuvre encountered. Be that as it may, the architectural setting for Prudentius' first, Hispanic readers is well presented so as to give an impression of the aspect of material culture. Next Hershkowitz surveys the shared values and concepts of a Classical education that provided Prudentius and his peers and readers with a common language (44–54: "Paideia in Hispania: A Socio-Cultural Network"). Hershkowitz accomplishes this through a detailed discussion of mosaics in villas and the potential analogy for Prudentius and his circle of readers offered by that of the contemporary Paulinus of Nola, who likewise resided in Hispania in this period before definitively leaving to take up residence in central Italia. The evidence of the mosaics is nicely brought into contact with Prudentius' work both here and in the Appendix (219–225), which offers a detailed listing of sites and textual parallels. The successive and concluding section of this chapter (54–75: "Christianity and Villa-Based Communities") utilises a variety of instances of material culture (e. g. altars and mosaics) and literary culture (e. g. a letter written by pope Siricius to bishop Himerius of Tarraco in AD 384 and the decrees of the Council of Toledo of AD 400) to furnish a nuanced vision of the religious landscape of Hispania in the later fourth century. Paganism and the symbols of Classical culture prevailed, but Christianity was spreading in capillary fashion and the problems of heresy and schism meant a far from unitary religious landscape.

The third chapter constitutes the core of this monograph, both in terms of structure and as regards content (76–122: "The *Peristephanon* and the Martyr Cults in Roman Spain"), for it focusses upon what can be determined about the relationship of the poems of the *Peristephanon* to Hispanic martyr cults existing at that epoch. Commencing with the address of Prudentius to Valerianus (presumably bishop of Calagurris), Hershkowitz observes that the invitation to introduce the cult of the Roman martyr Hippolytus to Hispania is coupled with an awareness of already existing Hispanic devotion to the cults of local martyrs; in what follows poetic texts are to be deployed with material culture to shed light upon the extent and nature of the veneration of martyrs in Hispania (76–79). The first section provides a backdrop for this discussion by reviewing the evidence for the inception of martyr cults across the whole of the late Roman world in the fourth century (79–86: "The Establishment of the Martyr Cults"). Recurring patterns (e. g. descriptions of martyrs' tombs as places of prayer and meditation and a narrative emphasis upon the willingness of martyrs to undergo extreme forms of physical

suffering) are observed that will appear again in the *Peristephanon*. Next, focussing upon the treatment accorded by Prudentius to the saints of Hispania, Hershkowitz examines those six poems of the *Peristephanon* (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8) in which Prudentius pays tribute to local martyrs (86–93: “The *Peristephanon* Poems: The Saints of Hispania”). The innovative aspect of the *Peristephanon* can be discerned from the fact that time and time again Prudentius constitutes our earliest evidence for the cult of the Hispanic saint being celebrated. On the other hand, he reflects in these poems long-standing beliefs (e.g. the protection afforded by a martyr’s intercession) and what may well be recent innovations (e.g. bringing cloths into contact with relics so as to receive their numinous quality). As represented by the poems in question, the Hispanic cities of Calagurris, Caesaraugusta, Tarraco, and Emerita are honoured by and draw benefit from their martyrs. The following section is dedicated to those five poems in which Prudentius celebrates saints in Italy (2, 9, 11, 12, and 14) and the three (7, 10, 13) in which saints from Pannonia, Carthage, and Syria likewise receive commemoration (93–97: “The *Peristephanon* Poems: Italy and Beyond”). Cult practices and particular reasons for the poet’s choice of saints to commemorate are explored here as in the case of the Hispanic saints. As Hershkowitz persuasively observes, not all of these cults (e.g. Quirinus) will have been known to Prudentius in their original locations, even if modern scholars (e.g. the reviewer) often use Prudentius for what he can tell us in terms of local history. The final section looks at the other hagiographical texts and material evidence for the cult of the Hispanic martyrs *tout court*, so as to provide context for the treatment of Prudentius (97–122: “Martyrs in Hispania: Evidential Texts and Material Culture”). Evidence ranging from Paulinus of Nola on the subject of the burial of his son to the account of the martyrdom of Isaiah given by Potamius of Olisipo through to the treatment accorded to the memory of Priscillian by the Council of Toledo is deployed so as to tease out recurring patterns and indicate just how important the testimony of Prudentius is.

The fourth chapter (123–159: “Visual Culture and Martyrs: Prudentius, Painter of Pictures in Words”) examines the potential relationship between the ostensible paintings that are the objects of the *ekphraseis* of Prudentius and what was likely the physical reality of the material culture to be seen by pilgrims visiting the tombs of the martyrs treated. Analysis focusses upon *Peristephanon* 9 (Cassian) and 11 (Hippolytus) because these are the only poems in which Prudentius describes his own presence at the tombs of the

martyrs. In the first of these poems, Prudentius offers readers a vivid sense of the pain inflicted upon the martyr Cassian as the schoolteacher is savagely stabbed innumerable times by his rebellious students with their writing instruments (*stylī*). As Hershkowitz observes through detailed analysis, Prudentius presents readers both with what is an intensely private response to the painting of Cassian's martyrdom and with the shared public response of a community celebrating the saint's memory (126–134: "Prudentius at the Tomb of Cassian"). In the second of these poems, Prudentius takes readers through a shifting ekphrastic landscape so as to provide them with a vivid sense of the death of the martyr Hippolytus. Hershkowitz nicely remarks how critics have been unable to agree upon precisely when the *ekphrasis* comes to an end. From the horrific rending assunder of the limbs of Hippolytus to the collection of these body parts and their burial in a catacomb (*crypta*), there exists a dramatic, visual continuum in the poet's verbal rendering of a painting that he saw when visiting the martyr's tomb. Again Hershkowitz perceptively highlights both the poet's private response and the public response of the community to the saint's story (134–142: "Prudentius at the Tomb of Hippolytus"). Next Hershkowitz proceeds to situate Prudentius' rhetorical strategy within the context of what handbooks recommended for those wishing to compose *ekphraseis*. Adding to this contemporaries' considerations on the art-form and the evidence of the *Tituli Historiarum* (or *Ditochaeon*) of Prudentius, Hershkowitz makes a plausible case for viewing Prudentius as engaging in what was common practice when he claims to be describing paintings that were to be seen (142–147: "Pictures Painted in Words"). Hershkowitz concludes this chapter by drawing upon the evidence of paintings and sculpture at Rome in the catacombs and in the *domus* beneath SS Giovanni e Paolo, so as to demonstrate that the paintings so vividly described by Prudentius could have existed – and probably did. Items such as the "Jonah" fresco in the Catacomb of SS Marcellino e Pietro and the Confessio fresco in the *domus* beneath SS Giovanni e Paolo convincingly show elements that correspond in striking fashion to the verbal descriptions of Prudentius. It would appear extremely likely that Prudentius was in fact describing actual artefacts when he wrote of the paintings of the martyrdoms of Cassian and Hippolytus (148–159: "The Actuality of the Martyr Paintings").

The argument culminates with the fifth chapter (160–213: "Prudentius' Poetry in the Context of the Late Antique Visual Culture of Hispania"), which

offers a sumptuous feast of material remains as Hershkowitz surveys in detail the evidence for the visual culture of Hispania in Late Antiquity in an attempt to furnish a precise context for the poetic production of Prudentius. It begins with the observation that there existed an inherent paradox between the poet's use of Classical forms of verbal expression and his disdain and distrust for Classical forms of visual expression; Christian and non-Christian visual cultures were incompatible on a fundamental level (160–168: “A Clash of Visual Cultures”). Then follows a review of the various forms of non-Christian artwork that modern excavations have been able to document as having once adorned the residences – houses and villas – of the elite of Hispania in Late Antiquity. Hunting scenes and mythological figures and themes figure large in this material for the fourth and early fifth centuries (169–194: “The Visual Culture of the Roman Elite”). Complementing this is the following section, which is dedicated to a review of Christian visual culture from this same region and period (194–205: “Christian Iconography in Prudentius' Hispania”). Hershkowitz not only highlights the relative paucity of this material, but also draws attention to sarcophagi and mosaics that find points of correspondence within the poetry of Prudentius. Particularly intriguing are the mosaics that were executed at Centelles and in the Villa of Fortunatus. It is worth adding that a detail from a mosaic from the latter site constitutes the photograph used for the monograph's cover, nicely encapsulating the interpretative problems faced in dealing with this intractable material. How is one to understand the *Chi-Rho* with its unusual inversion of the order of *Alpha* and *Omega*? As an apotropaic symbol or a sign of Christian faith, if not both at one and the same time? Drawing the discussion to a close, Hershkowitz proceeds to a brief analysis of how Prudentius and his peers would have viewed the world about them (205–208: “How Prudentius ‘Saw’ the Martyr Images: Visual Experience in Written Text”) and concludes by remarking how Prudentius' written texts could be translated into new visual instances (208–213: “‘Seeing’ the Martyrs in Hispania: Written Text to Visual Experience”). The effect of this meticulously detailed discussion is to situate the poetry of Prudentius once again within the Late Antique Hispanic setting that gave birth to it.

The sixth and final chapter (214–219: “An Epilogue for a Christian Poet”) closes the circle that had been opened by the first chapter with its examination of the epilogue that Prudentius had composed for his collective works. Hershkowitz reiterates the utility of employing material culture in order to

contextualise the poetic achievement of Prudentius and thereby to illustrate – albeit tentatively – what may be said about the contemporary audience for his poems in late antique Hispania and southern Gaul. The lack of a substantial contemporary material record for churches and martyrs' shrines is reiterated, as is the difficulty of inferring religious affinities from themes on sarcophagi imported from Rome to Hispania. Therefore, Hershkowitz has made use of the villas in order to illuminate the *ekphrasis* and overall poetic achievement of Prudentius, a non-theologian whose poetic defense and commemoration of Christianity would prove spectacularly influential in the centuries to come. With the hindsight of the historian, Hershkowitz is able to elucidate the ways in which Prudentius' poetry contributed to the eventual victory of Christianity and a new cultural idiom for the Latin-speaking world in the late antique West.

This book is dedicated to the intersection of text and material culture, and the emphasis is therefore properly put upon visual evidence. Nonetheless, various items might have been usefully deployed from the ideal world of the text to shed light upon the topic being investigated. For instance, the trochaic tetrameter catalectic meter is employed for the verses celebrating the military martyrs Emeterius and Chelidonius of Calagurris in *Peristephanon* 1, which choice is particularly significant in view of its common use for marching songs and *carmina triumphalia*². This seems rather germane to the discussion of Prudentius' treatment of the theme of *militia* and the *phalera* that excavators recovered from the site of Vareia (32, Fig. 2.1). To cite another example, the brief poem that Prudentius composed for the baptistery erected on the site of the martyrdom of Emeterius and Chelidonius (or so it would seem, on the most economical hypothesis) makes use of elegiac couplets, which verse form is normally found restricted to building inscriptions in the oeuvre of Damasus³. Meaningful patterns of striking relevance to the material world will emerge, if one takes the time to look at the seemingly arcane aspects of literature and linguistic play.

2 A.-M. Palmer: *Prudentius on the Martyrs*. Oxford 1989 (Oxford Classical Monographs), 61, remarking the common use but not explicitly informing readers why that is significant in this instance.

3 D.E. Trout: *Damasus of Rome. The Epigraphic Poetry. Introduction, Texts, Translations, and Commentary*. Oxford 2015 (Oxford Early Christian Texts), 19.

Postmodernist terminology deployed in the study of Late Antiquity can on occasion prove infelicitous and nonsensical. Exemplary of this fact is the description of Prudentius as a “villa-poet” (for those instances of her use of this term that are considered most significant by Hershkowitz, see 254 index s. v.). Is this some new category that had not existed previously, but came into being and enjoyed an existence peculiar to the fourth and fifth centuries? From the citing of Prudentius, Paulinus, Ausonius, and Sidonius Apollinaris as examples⁴, it would appear that Hershkowitz thinks so. Then, however, what are we to make of figures such as Vergil or Horace? As a Late Antique scholiast reminds us, it was within the setting of a villa at Atella near to Neapolis that the entirety of the *Georgica* was read to the victorious Caesar the Younger upon his return from the campaign against M. Antonius and Cleopatra VII (Donat. *vit. Verg.* 27). And what are we to make then of such extraordinary survivals as the library of the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum? As so often, one gets the impression that Late Modern scholars are like little children tromping around in their parents’ shoes blithely unaware of the fact that they are not inventing anything particular new or noteworthy. The novelty here, if one must perforce speak of novelty, is the fact that actors on the periphery of the Roman world had appropriated the instruments of culture and used them to create distinctively Christian works of art that would enjoy a hegemonic influence on European culture for the next millennium. Juvencus, Paulinus, and Prudentius were engaged in using Classical culture to give expression to Christian ideas and values. Which thought raises a secondary criticism. If we need a term that distinguishes them from their Classical predecessors, then why not speak of these poets as “church-poets”? Repeatedly the content of their work – in contrast with its form – points to the idea that their work would be recited (or performed, if one prefers) within the setting of a church, chapel, or cemetery. Just as the work of Arator is known to have been performed first within the setting of St Peter in Chains in the sixth century and as was apparently the purpose informing the bold undertaking of Juvencus to express the Gospels in Latin hexameter, so it would seem – despite a lack of supporting evidence – that Prudentius meant for his works such as the hymns of the *Peristephanon* to be recited at the shrines of the martyrs and saints. Such certainly seems to have been the

4 Hershkowitz 37 n. 23, referring to K. Bowes: *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge 2008, 179–180.

case with a significant portion of the poetic work of Paulinus of Nola.⁵ Rather than to the symposiastic setting of the villa, or its ascetic successor in certain quarters in the fourth and fifth centuries, such works were far more suited to the communal setting of those places where the martyrs were jointly commemorated by wealthy and poor alike. The term “villa-poet”, to conclude, therefore seems to cast into obscurity an essential feature of Prudentian *poiesis*, viz. the creation of a new, joint community of worship on the basis of the culture of the elite.

Hershkowitz’s arguments for a minimalist view of the Spanish element of the court of Theodosius I are persuasive, as is her positing a distance between that court and Prudentius. On the other hand, her use of alleged Spanish influences at Rome (Damasus, Theodosius I) to explain the focalisation of *Peristephanon* 12 is unconvincing (95). As has been remarked with critical insight by Carlo Carletti and Dennis Trout, Damasus most assuredly did not have Spanish origins, but came instead from Latium⁶. Moreover, the phrase “involved in the construction of St Peter’s basilica” is infelicitous, for it suggests work upon the main basilica rather than the documented intervention of Damasus in the creation of a baptistery (Damas. *carm.* 3–4 Trout). As for Theodosius I, it is most curious that Prudentius makes no reference to the emperor’s Hispanic origins (Prud. *perist.* 12.47: *princeps bonus*, where *noster* could easily have been used in place of *bonus has*), especially in light of the demonstrable pride that Prudentius took in his own Hispanic background. Hershkowitz is quite right to remark the oddity of this poem’s focus, but that problem seems better resolved in terms of the poet’s concern for items linked to people of Catholic faith. For this reason, it would appear, does Prudentius focus first upon the baptistery of St Peter in the Vatican and then

- 5 For the performance of Paulinus’ *natalicia* for Felix of Nola, see J. Fontaine: *Naissance de la poésie dans l’Occident chrétien. Esquisse d’une histoire de la poésie latine chrétienne du IIIe au VIe siècle.* Paris 1981, 172 n.305; D. E. Trout: *Paulinus of Nola. Life, Letters, and Poems.* Berkeley 1999, 181–182; M. J. Roberts: *Rhetoric and the Natalicia of Paulinus of Nola.* In: *QUCC* 95.2, 2010, 53–69, here 59, 63, 68 n.2. For a detailed treatment of the matter, readers are now referred to I. Fielding: *Performing Miracles: The Natalicia of Paulinus of Nola as Popular Entertainment.* In: *Ramus* 47.1, 2018, 108–122.
- 6 Trout (above, n. 3), 3; C. Carletti: *Damaso I, santo.* In: *Enciclopedia dei Papi*, vol. 1. Roma 2000, 349 (with reference to the earlier literature on this subject). It is a pleasant surprise to find further cause for agreement with Edward Gibbon’s estimate of the critical acumen of Le Nain de Tillemont.

upon the basilica of St Paul outside the Walls. As for the failure to offer a vivid narrative of the passions of these two saints, various reasons come to mind. Perhaps the most likely cause was the poet's desire to avoid competition on a subject where victory was impossible, for either one created a work of art that was felt to be insufficient to the subject or else one created poetry that was attacked out of envy. Better an oblique approach to so treacherous a topic. As the Egyptian proverb had it, one does not carry olives to Pano-polis.

As regards the villa of Centcelles, Hershkowitz is probably correct in refusing to identify the central, domed space as the mausoleum of the emperor Constans (AD 337–350). In addition to her citation of a personal communication and unpublished work by Kim Bowes, when adducing the practical issues of access and location within a villa in use, there is the consideration that Constans was killed in southwestern Gaul whereas Centcelles lies *ca.* 150 km to the south of the Pyrenees. It is quite difficult to imagine why the disgraced emperor's body should have been transported so far from where he met his end. While Hershkowitz would have done her readers a service if she had cited the work of Helmut Schlunk, Mark Johnson,⁷ and others of the same erroneous opinion, her historical judgement is fundamentally sound and susceptible of additional corroboration. The mere fact that an artefact strikes the modern viewer as impressive is not sufficient evidence to warrant the thesis of imperial patronage.

The bibliography is ample and well presented. There does occur the occasional omission that can surprise, e.g. Trout's work on Paulinus of Nola and pope Damasus or Johnson's treatment of late antique mausolea ranging from Rome to Centcelles. However, these faults are compensated by the fact that Hershkowitz has a firm grasp of the archaeological literature in Spanish and English and introduces English-speaking readers to a range of materials that they would otherwise be unlikely to know. The Spanish bibliography is extraordinarily rich and extensive, and Hershkowitz elegantly negotiates the two different scholarly worlds. Her work merits a place next to the useful

7 H. Schlunk: Die Mosaikkuppel von Centcelles. Aus dem Nachlaß für den Druck bearb. u. mit Anmerkungen versehen v. A. Arbeiter. Mit Beiträgen v. E. Hawkins u. H.-G. Bachmann. Vol. 2: Text. Mainz 1988 (Madrider Beiträge 13), 148; M. J. Johnson: The Roman Imperial Mausoleum in Late Antiquity. Cambridge 2009, 129–139.

volumes of Michael Kulikowski and Kim Bowes⁸ that will be well known to readers.

- 8 M. Kulikowski: *Late Roman Spain and its Cities*. Baltimore, MD/London 2004; K. Bowes (above, n. 4); K. Bowes: *Houses and Society in the Later Roman Empire*. London 2010; K. Bowes/M. Kulikowski (eds.): *Hispania in Late Antiquity. Current Perspectives*. Leiden/Boston 2005 (*The Medieval and Early Modern Iberian World* 24).

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