Ann-Kathrin Stähle: *Quid poema frangat?* Zur Poetik des Bruchs in den Carmina des Sidonius Apollinaris. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2025 (Hermes-Einzelschriften 127). 244 p. € 56.00. ISBN: 978-3-515-13935-9.

In this slightly revised version of her 2022 Basel doctoral dissertation, Ann-Kathrin Stähle presents the most comprehensive argument to date for the unity of Sidonius Apollinaris' *Carmina*. Rather than viewing the collection's fragmentation as a limitation, she recasts it as the very foundation of its coherence. Stähle introduces the concept of a 'poetics of rupture', a framework that moves beyond the traditional 'poetics of the fragment' associated with Late Antiquity since Michael Roberts' "The Jeweled Style".[1] As she explains, "[w]hile the fragment implicitly refers to a whole, since it is defined as part of that whole, the rupture points to the inherent 'disruptions' within a whole".[2] This shift in perspective, she claims, allows her to uncover a deeper unity within the apparent fractures of Sidonius' work.

Central to her argument is a radical metapoetical reading of the *Carmina*. Stähle focuses on the prefaces and select poems, which she reinterprets as 'paratextual programmatic poems'. The paratextual poems in the *Carmina*, she argues, serve a dual purpose: apart from introducing individual pieces, such as the panegyrics and the epithalamia, or framing the *Carmina minora* part, they act as signposts for the collection's overarching structure. Throughout the collection, she identifies a fixed set of what she terms 'poetological elements' – allegory, ekphrasis, catalogue, antithesis, simile/comparison (*Gleichnis*) and the intertwining of genres (*Gattungsgeflecht*) – that collectively disclose the collection's fragmented yet unified character. In addition, the poet's own position is portrayed as fractured, oscillating between different Muses and the tensions of *otium* and *negotium*.

The book is structured in four chapters. After the introduction, Chapter 2 examines the paratextual programmatic poems, Chapter 3 analyzes the poet-

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1　M. Roberts: The Jeweled Style. Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity. Ithaca, NY/ London 1989.

2　"Während das Fragment implizit auf ein Ganzes verweist, insofern es als Teil des Ganzen definiert ist, deutet der Bruch auf die inhärenten 'Störungen' in einem Ganzen hin" (p. 16). Translations from the German are mine.

ological elements, and Chapter 4 explores the themes of inspiration and poetry. A brief conclusion (pp. 215–217) follows.

The introductory chapter (pp. 9–19) begins with an analysis of the structure of the 24-poem *Carmina* collection ("Werkstruktur der *Carmina*", pp. 9–11). Stähle sidesteps the unresolved question of the collection's various editorial stages (if it was not put out as a whole) and instead adopts the thematic subdivision into three groups of eight poems, propagated by Jesús Hernández Lobato (inspired by Bill Daly): the three panegyrics with their satellite poems and the two halves of the *Carmina minora*.[3] This division, in principle, strongly emphasizes carm. 16, the *Eucharisticon* to bishop Faustus, the collection's only Christian-inspired poem. Curiously, Stähle initially avoids this conclusion, only to take it for granted further on (pp. 68 [playing with the idea that it is a later inlay], 116, 189). What is more, she entirely forgoes a discussion of Hernández Lobato's work, despite the fact that the latter devised a concept of the *Carmina*'s unity that covers much of Stähle's own ground, though with a conclusion ('the death of poetry') that Stähle probably would not share. In a brief and highly selective overview of scholarship on fragmentation ("Fragmentcharakter und Einheit der *Carmina* – ein Forschungsüberblick", pp. 12–16), which acknowledges work done by Roberts, Jean-Louis Charlet, Hernández Lobato and Helen Kaufmann, she mentions a 2009 article by Annick Stoehr-Monjou that evidently particularly inspired her as it applies a metapoetical reading to the *Panegyrics* for the motifs of decay and renewal expressed in allegorical prefaces, variations, allusions, antitheses, golden verses, ekphraseis, catalogues, intertextuality, and epic and historical exempla.[4] In this connection, Stähle also mentions the importance of myth for the creation of identity, despite its being morally improper from a Christian point of view. The latter is one 'rupture' among many that Stähle considers as the very essence of the paradoxical unity of the *Carmina*.

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3    See W. M. Daly: An Adverse Consensus Questioned: Does Sidonius's *Eucharisticon* (Carmen XVI) Show that He Was Scripturally Naïve? In: Traditio 55, 2000, pp. 19–71, at p. 70; J. Hernández Lobato: Vel Apolline muto. Estética y poética de la Antigüedad tardía. Bern 2012, pp. 57–72; cf. S. Santelia: Sidonio Apollinare, *Carmina Minora*. Testo, traduzione e note. Saggio introduttivo di S. Condorelli. Naples 2023 (Studi Latini n. s. 97), p. 125, n. 4.

4    A. Stoehr-Monjou: Sidoine Apollinaire et la fin d'un monde. Poétique de l'éclat dans les panégyriques et leurs préfaces. In: REL 87, 2009, pp. 207–230; see also A. Stoehr-Monjou: Sidonius' Panegyrics. In: G. Kelly/J. van Waarden (eds.): The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris. Edinburgh 2020, pp. 317–340.

Chapter 2 (“Paratextuelle Programmgedichte”, pp. 20–95) on the paratextual programmatic poems successively discusses the poems that accompany the panegyrics (1, pp. 20–39; 3, 4, pp. 40–45; 6, pp. 46–53; 8, pp. 53–70), the opening poem of the *Carmina minora* (9, pp. 53–70), the prefaces to both epithalamia (10, 14, pp. 70–87) and the final piece (24, pp. 87–95). In each case, Stähle applies the set of poetological elements as a lens, magnifying individual words and phrases to highlight their meaningful recurrence across the collection. For carm. 1, the preface to the Panegyric of Anthemius, this works as follows. It contains comparisons, of Jupiter and Anthemius to begin with. The various gods vie to praise Jupiter (v. 3 *certavere*), Sidonius vies to praise the emperor. Stähle then sidesteps the context (in which Sidonius claims only a modest place compared with the really important speakers of the day, v. 24 *post magnos proceres*) and, mustering the elements of genre and intertextuality, argues that Sidonius’ contest is an intertextual one with literature, in the various genres represented by the gods (Mars epic, Mercury epistolography etc.) in the appropriate metres (v. 4 *modis*). The next element is antithesis. One example of the metapoetical bias may suffice: *disparibus* [...] *par* (v. 4) is taken to point to the *variatio* and *imitatio* inherent to poetical reception in general, whereas, in context, it describes the unison in variety of the divine orchestra (and implicitly the many-voiced praise of the emperor). The last element is the catalogue, in this case coinciding with ekphrasis, of the gods making music. Lines 11–12 *post caelicolas etiam mediocria* [...] | *cantica semideum* (the demigods succeeding the heavenly gods in singing) are taken to denote the split in the *Carmina* collection between panegyrics and *Carmina minora*. Stähle highlights the central line of the poem, v. 15, a *versus aureus,* arguing that it lends an epic nuance – though she does not explain how this connects to the line’s otherwise unremarkable content. In short, textual elements are consistently interpreted as metapoetical pointers that transcend, or even negate, their immediate context. In this vein, she also introduces an interesting thematic strand concerning the figure of Chiron (v. 17), to whom Sidonius compares himself for his well-intentioned but clumsy performance. She points out that Chiron returns in carm. 14 with the same behaviour and in carm. 23 as *magister* of poetry, and interprets this as a development from sympathetic jester to formidable authority. Chiron is the ‘broken’ alter ego of the poet. Not satisfied with this, she adduces two intertexts for carm. 1: Ov. ars 1.11–17, which she thinks prefigures Sidonius’ themes of war in the panegyrics (Chiron teaching Achilles) and love in the epithalamia (Ovid teaching Amor), and Germanicus’ *Arati Phaenomena* 414–425, where the con-

stellation of Centaurus suggests to her the equation *sidus–Sidonius*. More intertexts are proposed for carm. 14 and 23, among them Stat. silv. 5.3.191–194, which hinges on the verb form *frangebat* in v. 194 *Aeaciden alio frangebat carmine Chiron*. In its original context, it means 'curbed', 'civilized', but Stähle thinks it points to the 'fractures' in Sidonius' poetry (as she indeed plausibly does for carm. 14.30 *carmen rumperet hinniente cantu*). Coming to the theme of myth, she boldly takes Chiron's physical division to signify the merging of myth and Christianity. From these associations – some more plausible than others – a rounded Bakhtinian-carnivalesque portrait of Chiron occasionally emerges, though it risks being obscured by excessive detail.

Chapter 3 ("Poetologische Elemente", pp. 96–190) begins with allegory as the first poetological element (pp. 96–137), citing Philip Hardie for its being central to the "late antique mind-set".[5] Successively, Phoenix, Hercules and Oenotria–Aurora–Roma are investigated. For Phoenix, Stähle sees the myth unfold from carm. 2 (Phoenix' origin) to 4 (flight to Heliopolis), 9/14 (nest building) and 22 (death). Thanks to this ring composition, Phoenix can emerge anew with every rereading of the *Carmina*. Like Phoenix, the *Carmina* find themselves in an eternally recurring cycle. The figure of Hercules, saviour of mankind and a figure with whom the poet identifies, is revived in Christ. Christ is central in carm. 16, which marks a new beginning in the coexistence of Christian and pagan ideas in Sidonius. The three personified goddesses Oenotria, Aurora and Roma convey both a political and a poetological message: the empire in decline (Roma, the west) is expected to experience a new period of prosperity (Aurora, the east, and in her wake Oenotria); the poet's work is defined by rupture and consists of two main parts, just like the empire. This recurring feature of Stähle's thinking, establishing story lines across the collection, is also seen in the case of Medea, who changes from a negative to a positive figure in her successive appearances in carm. 2, 5 and 9.

The next subject is ekphrasis (pp. 138–144), which is investigated by means of the depiction of the Huns in carm. 2.243–269. Stähle sees the complex relationship between description and its object reflected in contradictions, oppositions and ambiguities, at the lexical level, like thin–thick, present–absent, as well as in content, like the mixture of man and animal in the Huns.

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5      P. Hardie: Classicism and Christianity in Late Antique Latin Poetry. Oakland, CA
         2019 (Sather Classical Lectures 74), p. 188.

There is also rupture due to intertextuality with Claudian (*in Rufinum* 1.323–331), who is utterly negative about the Huns, whereas Sidonius' appreciation is balanced.

As to catalogues (pp. 145–153), Stähle points out that they interrupt the narration and as such cause ruptures. She argues that Sidonius takes this to the limit. For instance, carm. 9 in its entirety is the negation of a catalogue and the catalogues of imperial ancestors in the panegyrics are very unequal, either refused or only partially executed. Catalogues both strengthen and weaken ekphrases when they are combined. For instance, the praise of Majorian in carm. 5.153–97 is reinforced by his comparison with a long series of mythical figures but, at the same time, the individual heroes lose importance. Stähle infers that the poet creates the impression of chaos and desintegration of the narrative. His catalogues are not aimed to develop essential themes but to destabilize the text.

In similar ways, the remaining poetological elements pass in review: antithesis (pp. 153–165), comparison (pp. 165–180) and genre (pp. 180–190). The notion of comparison is interpreted broadly to encompass not only Homeric-style similes but also mythical and historical *exempla* and intertextual equations. In the panegyrics comparisons serve to legitimize the ruler. But the mechanism also works at a metapoetical level as Sidonius suggests an analogy between his work and the state. The healing of the rupture of both halves of the empire is mirrored in the unity in diversity of the panegyrics and the *Carmina minora*. The interplay of genres is a structural element in the collection. In the panegyrics the well-known fusion of praise and epic since Claudian is applied according to a sliding scale: the share of epic is modest in carm. 2, restricted to the emperor's origin, it encroaches on the eulogy in carm. 5 and is fully deployed in Jupiter's allocution in carm. 7. Conversely, the invocation of the Muses is present in carm. 2, is rejected in carm. 5 and is absent in carm. 7: the poet no longer hides behind the Muses in his role as narrator. There is also a shift in the epithalamia: whereas the first (carm. 11) adheres to the mythological tradition of the genre, the second (carm. 15) tends towards the satirical. Sidonius makes it clear that he knows the rules of the genre but will only obey them on his own conditions.

Chapter 4 ("Inspiration und Dichtung", pp. 191–214) explores the subject of the Muse and *otium* (German: "Muse" and "Muße") in more depth. The role of the Muses is utterly variable and ambivalent, spanning worlds of boldness and modesty (carm. 23) as well as war and peace (carm. 2), invoked or

rejected (the latter in carm. 5 and 16), praised or criticized (9.318 *sterilis*, 23.124 *non ita musicas*). Stähle concludes that "[t]he poet envisages a work that, being in constant reversal, cannot be fixed, remains multidimensional, and thus continually creates new stimuli for the recipient".[6] *Otium* is also unstable, denoting peace as opposed to war, either slothful peace when war must be waged or beneficial peace that puts an end to war. In passages where *otium* is combined with verb forms of *frangere* (e.g. carm. 5.540–551 and 16.104–108), the person who is 'broken' through exertion finds peace or, inversely, someone is 'broken' by doing nothing. Stähle takes this as a metaphor of the author's literary activity, which goes back and forth between political engagement and literary seclusion. Reinforcing this metapoetical reading, she also projects it onto the spatial dimensions of the work. The claustrophobic description of the Symplegads and Vulcan's cave in carm. 11 ultimately denotes the constraints to his *otium* experienced by the poet amid the political turmoil. Conversely, he enjoys creative freedom in the circle of family and intellectual friends, as evidenced, for instance, by the invitation to dinner in carm. 17.

The conclusion sums up how "[t]he poetics of rupture, which tends [...] to transgress established genre conventions through the conscious use of contradictions and inconsistencies and thus constantly to disappoint the reader's expectations, is made accessible and understandable through the indications in the programmatic poems." The poet's attitude towards his work is both tentative and self-confident as he "constantly plays with [its] boundaries and norms, which at the same time implies a self-ironic approach to his own oeuvre".[7]

Evaluating this deliberately 'broken' and elusive book is no simple task. The study of paratexts is highly topical, and any monograph in this field is welcome. Stähle's book aligns with the current scholarly trend of treating the

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6    "Der Dichter beabsichtigt ein Werk, das in der steten Umkehr begriffen, nicht zu fixieren ist, multidimensional bleibt und für den Rezipienten mithin immer wieder neue Anreize schafft" (p. 200).

7    "Die Poetik des Bruchs, die dazu neigt, [...] überkommene Gattungskonventionen durch den bewussten Einsatz von Widersprüchen und Unstimmigkeiten zu überschreiten und die Erwartung der Leser so ständig zu enttäuschen, wird durch die Hinweise in den Programmgedichten zugänglich und verständlich." "[...] mit dessen Grenzen und Normen der Dichter unablässig spielt, was zugleich einen selbstironischen Umgang mit der eigenen Literatur impliziert" (p. 217).

reading of late antique texts (and collections) as a creative act for the reader, outlined and driven by the texts' paratextual constituents, prefaces, farewell pieces, covering letters and so forth. These paratexts are seen, rather than as contingent elements, as global metapoetic signposts. Following these, readers are invited to 'forget' and transcend the text. They may cross its threshold and enter a world, not of the text but enabled by the text, to (re)create and marvel at the infinite possibilities that it contains and suggests. In this context, Stähle has recently also issued her credentials as co-editor of a multi-author volume titled "The Dynamics of Paratextuality in Late Antique Literature. Stumbling Texts".[8]

Depending on one's adherence to this way of thinking, one will judge many reasonings in the book under consideration as either brilliant or flawed. Personally, I am convinced that classical philology is a historical discipline and that we must limit ourselves to what can be known, or, at most, considered plausible, in a historical context. Going further, blurring the boundaries between ancient and modern readers and relying on the latter to creatively (de)construct late antique texts, may produce intriguing artistic results, but it risks losing sight of our limited source material. However, applying this criticism to Stähle's book would be unfair, given her meticulous close-readings and her consistent effort to interpret the *Carmina* as a unified whole. That is why I prefer to suspend my judgement and ask a number of questions instead:

- Can an experimental book like this dispense with a thorough chapter on theory and methodology? Is there no need to justify the limited and almost incidental selection of secondary literature and the very assumption that the poetry is self-referential?

- Is it justified to treat the 'poetological elements' as heuristic tools for metapoetical references, assuming that encountering the former guarantees the presence of the latter? They were at least not meant to work this way in Stoehr-Monjou's seminal article, as far as I can see. Are

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8 C. Guerra/M. Kersten/A.-K. Stähle (eds.): The Dynamics of Paratextuality in Late Antique Literature. Stumbling Texts. London 2024 (sera tela 3). The book contains a lucid introduction to the problem by Markus Kersten titled "Stumbling at the Threshold: Late Antique Paratexts Between Discursive Enrichment and Interpretive Challenge" (pp. 3–18).

metapoetical statements indeed necessarily indicated by stylistic devices?

- Is not the only viable conclusion from the linear and circular development proposed here that the *Carmina* were composed all at once? If not so, it seems impossible for all individual story lines to fall into place simultaneously during the rearrangement of originally independent parts.

- Even if we accept the hypothesis that the *Carmina* form a premeditated unity, is it linguistically valid to interpret every single word and phrase through this lens, regardless of context? The prime example here is the semantic field of *frangere-flectere-rumpere*, which is always taken to relate to poetological rupture, regardless whether it is about the dancing Chiron (carm. 1.18), a sinking ship (2.15) or Sidonius' lack of inspiration (12.8).

- How could the *Carmina*'s components have served their original, practical purposes for their addressees if – put bluntly – the collection is ultimately about itself, and the ideal reader approaches it with an unrestrained allegorical mindset?

- Would Sidonius have recognized himself in this interpretation? Or is that question beside the point?

To put it in the terminology of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stähle has written a 'language game' that is valid on its own terms but raises questions when taken into the outside world.

The book features elegant typography and a sturdy hardback binding. Typos are rare, and the digital edition is commendably open-access.[9]

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[9] Available online as an e-book at URL: https://www.steiner-verlag.de/Quid-poema-frangat/9783515139366.

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