

KARSTEN C. RONNENBERG, *Mythos bei Hieronymus. Zur christlichen Transformation paganer Erzählungen in der Spätantike*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2015, 386S. (= Hermes. Zeitschrift für Klassische Philologie. Einzelschriften, vol. 108), ISBN 978-3-515-11146-1.

Much ink has already been spilled over the life and work of Jerome (*Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus*, 347–420 A.D.). Also the relationship to paganism and pagan literature of this classically educated, much traveled and highly influential doctor of the church has been extensively discussed in research. However, by drawing attention on Jerome's dealing with ancient Greek "myths" – here: accounts of pagan gods and semi-gods perceived as unhistorical *fabulae* –, Karsten C. Ronnenberg chose an interesting topic that has been widely neglected so far and only marginally treated with regard to the reception of ancient literature, the use of *exempla* and the pagan influences in the Vulgata Bible. Instead of following a reception history approach and based on an understanding of "myth" that sees the combination of constant repetition and simultaneous change as an essential feature, the monograph focuses on 'transformations' as complex processes of change that take place between a reference area (ancient Greek myths) and a reception area (Jerome's literary work), with the peculiarity that the reception area is subject to religious guidelines, which also includes the ideological rejection of the reference area. Within this framework, the analysis concentrates on the functions of mythical references and aims, at a more general level, at contributing both to the intellectual history of the late antiquity and to the evaluation of the view that the Greek myths were, if any, only critically examined by Christians or reinterpreted for their purposes.

Ronnenberg counts 772 references to ancient Greek mythical figures/ places in Jerome's different writings, including his commentaries, and stresses that the knowledge of most of them appears belonging to the church father's 'cultural baggage' and not stemming from concrete literary works. Furthermore, there seems to be no handling of pagan narratives systematically thought through, nor a particularly original judgment of Greek divine tales because we encounter, in essence, the view developed by the apologists that the gods of the Gentiles are nothing more than humans who were heroized and worshiped after their deaths. Nowwithstanding, a good number of *exempla* with reference to mythical themes – and this is where Ronnenberg's book comes in – do not correspond with this negative apologetic verdict on the ancient myths. Regarding Jerome's general

understanding of these myths (chapt. 4), emphasis is put on his belief of Christianity being the oldest religion of the world; accordingly paganism was perceived as an *error* and myths as distorted acquisitions from the Bible. This belief, although barely perceptible, was continuously in the background of Jerome's dealing with pagan narratives. Among the various references in his writings, the Latin Vulgata translation, to which chap. 5 is dedicated, constitutes in so far an exception as mythical figures (mentioned 281 times) were either terminological and otherwise not translatable equivalents in Latin, or terms (like *gigantes*) adopted from the Greek Septuagint which, as a result of a strongly Hellenistic exegesis, had been translated from Hebrew. Ronnenberg explains this practice in the Vulgata with a contemporary relevance: with the habits of his audience and with the myths as a potential rhetorical reference point both for polemics against heretics and the evidence that Christianity was older than Paganism.

The very core of the analysis is chap. 6 which occupies more than half of the entire book. It deals with 276 mythical references outside the bible and their narrative background. As no classification according to chronology or literary genres was possible, the author decided to examine the function of the *exempla* in relation to the object they refer to and distinguished six types of objects: places and historical events (chap. 6.1); pagan cults (chap. 6.2); acts, behaviors, *abstracta* (chap. 6.3); the seven main vices (chap. 6.4); biblical figures and accounts (chap. 6.5); contemporary and historical persons (chap. 6.6.). Among these, the seven capital vices were the most central theme for Jerome. But other than one would expect, the greater part of the mythical references to them was positively connoted and mentioned to praise the renunciation of vicious life. In this way, the ideal of Christian asceticism was emphasized, especially in *Adversus Iovinianum*, where the abundance of examples gives the impression that the author wanted to represent here a sort of majority opinion in defense of his own ascetic positions. Also when referring to Greek myths in the context of deeds (*gesta*), behaviors or abstract things (such as imperfection, age, grief, marriage, music etc.), this was partly done with positive connotations. Interesting here is Ronnenberg's observation that Jerome in his comment on Dan. 4 declared the mythical set pieces to be historically true in order to prove – albeit contradictorily – that the biblical narrative in the Book of Daniel is *historia* and not *fabula*. Furthermore, the church father seems to have had no doubt about the historicity of local traditions linked to places belonging to the ancient Greek world, as knowledge on them appears as part of the “landscapes of memory” supplemented by biblical accounts. However, when contemporary or historical persons were mentioned in connection with mythical figures, it was always in a negative way in the form of insults or ironic comparisons. Of no greater relevance in Jerome's work were *exempla* linked to pagan cults

or to biblical stories, and not surprisingly, the former stressed the negative aspects of paganism, while the latter were used either without judgment or with positive connotation.

Ronnenberg's detailed analysis shows, on the one hand, the great variety of *exempla* relating to Greek mythology throughout Jerome's writings, with exception of the liturgical ones which do not mention any ancient god or hero. Source of information were often Cicero, Horace, Ovid, Virgil and Seneca. On the other hand, it becomes clear that in view of the large number of texts, there are mostly short and relatively few, but nevertheless constant, references. Despite his generally negative attitude towards Pagan culture and always with a Christian audience in mind, Jerome was concerned with underpinning the credibility of the Bible and his own theological positions and ascetic tenets. In practice, however, he did not always draw a clear conceptual line dividing *fabulae poetorum*, *gentilium* or *ethnorum* from 'historical truth'. Nonetheless he dealt continuously in a critical-reflected way with ancient educational knowledge by limiting himself to a particular repertoire that was understandable for late-antique, educated Christians. All in all, Jerome was, according to Ronnenberg, no mythographer. Instead, he referred to ancient Greek myths to illustrate, to value, to entertain, to convince and not least to underline his own high education, literacy and position as a literary authority. All this shows that there were no binding conventions at that time for the use of mythical references in prose literature. On the same line with the apologists and thus in the literary tradition of Christian texts, Jerome's specifics are not only in the wide range and the high number of mythical examples, which gave him the possibility of great variation, but also in the casualness and naturalness of his dealing with myths, which was new in this form and seems to reflect the circumstance that pagan faith in the 4th/5th century was no longer perceived as a serious danger. Ronnenberg summarizes that all of the above aspects contributed to the fact that Jerome became *the* relevant author for the knowledge and dissemination of Greek mythology in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, until Petrarca in the 14th century went *ad fontes*.

Although the small-scaled and function-focused analysis makes a complete reading of the book a bit tedious and the theoretical approach regarding transformation processes between a reference area and a reception area looks rather glued on paper (the author would have certainly come to the same conclusions, had he analyzed the function of mythical references without that approach), Ronnenberg's monograph is well-structured and useful as a reference book, furnished among other things with a list of mythical references (specifying names of figures from the *fabulae* not attributable to Greek myths and passages only translated) and a list of the sources used by Jerome. The study's results are definitely stimulating because they refute the widespread, stereotyped view that Christian authors just have either

interpreted Greek myths negatively or reinterpreted them in the Christian sense.

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