

Andrew H. Merrills, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought 64), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. XIV + 386 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-521-84601-1.

In this book, which is a revised version of his Cambridge PhD thesis, Andrew Merrills examines the nature of the relationship between 'geographical' and 'historical' writing in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Incorporating a geographical excursus into an otherwise purely historiographical narrative was not uncommon among Roman historians. One needs only mention Sallust's detailed description of Numidia in his introduction to the *Bellum Jugurthinum*, Julius Caesar's opening of his *De bello Gallico*, or even Appian's account of the Roman Empire at the beginning of his *Historia Romana*, to demonstrate how widespread this literary device was in Roman historiography, in both the eastern and the western provinces of the Roman Empire. However, according to Merrills, during the fifth century there was a change in emphasis in our sources, marked by the prominent position granted to geographical concerns by late antique historians. Whereas most modern scholars have assumed that these geographical *excursus* were merely intended to set the spatial stage for the historical narrative, or to display the author's literary abilities, Merrills clearly and very convincingly argues that these passages had a rhetorical function to play, and that they were shaped by the author's fresh understanding of the past. '[I]t is assumed', he writes in the introduction, 'that when a society experiences a dramatic change in the understanding of its own past, as reflected in its modes of historical expression, its attitudes to the physical world will undergo comparable change' (11). Hence, amidst the changing reality of the post-Roman world, where Barbarian *gentes* and Christianity dominated the scene, geographical digressions became a way to challenge the Roman-centric *Weltbild*. In order to prove his point, Merrills examines in detail the historical work of four authors, who chose to open their work with a geographical (or rather a geo-ethnographical) prologue, that is, Orosius, Jordanes, Isidore of Seville, and Bede. Merrills' choice of authors and works is not at all surprising. Not only are these the most conspicuous examples of geographical prologues that have survived from Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, but they also vary quite dramatically from one another, and hence provide a wide spectrum of the phenomenon in question.

The first chapter is dedicated to the Spanish priest Paulus Orosius, whose work was largely neglected by modern scholarship, not the least because of the overarching shadow of his mentor, Augustine of Hippo. Nevertheless, Orosius' *Historiarum adversus paganos libri septem* must be regarded, alongside Eusebius' *Historia ecclesiastica* and Jerome's *Chronicon*, as a pivotal precursor of Christian historiography. Orosius chose to open his work with a rather lengthy description of the world, which, according to Merrills, reflects the changing attitudes engendered by the Christianisation of the Roman Empire. This geographical introduction, as pointed out by Merrills, 'was intended, not as a simple delineation of the world upon which the later narrative would be set, but rather as an implicit demonstration of the breadth of the Christian world, and the limitations of the mundane kingdoms that had come before it' (98). Orosius' influence on many a generation of Christian historians was immense, and his opening to the *Historia* clearly transformed the geographical introduction from an occasional literary tool to a central feature of Christian historiography.

Unlike Orosius' geographical *excursus*, Jordanes' opening to his *De origine actibusque Getarum* (commonly known as the *Getica*) reflects the changing political reality of the post-Roman world. Merrills rightly stresses the fact that Jordanes' *Getica* is much more than simple borrowings from Cassiodorus' lost *Historia Gothorum*. He also acknowledges that, like Cassiodorus, Jordanes produced an historical narrative that was meant to integrate Gothic history into the Roman past. Jordanes' creativity reveals itself, according to Merrills, in the ethnogeographical introduction to his *Getica*, where he delineates the ethnogenesis of the Goths, and very elegantly connects their history with that of Rome. 'In celebrating both their antiquity, and

their anticipated absorption into Justinian's revived empire, the historian sought to clarify the boundaries between the triumphant imperial house and the exotic *gens* subdued before him' (167).

Isidore of Seville's *Laus Spaniae*, which opens his revised version of the *Historia Gothorum, Wandalorum, Sueborum*, forms Merrills' third case study. This is by far the shortest passage of all those discussed by Merrills, but it is also the most intriguing one. As Merrills clearly demonstrates, the *Laus Spaniae* should be read with the so-called *Laus Gothorum* that concludes the *Historia*, and together they reflect Isidore's notion that 'the successful union of *Hispania* and *Gothia* could only take place under the benevolent aegis of the Catholic Church' (227). This was the leitmotif of Isidore's political ideology, and it recurs in his writings like a theme in an opera.

Bede is the most problematic example discussed by Merrills. Although he manages to demonstrate how the geographical introduction and some other geographical passages in the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* reflect Bede's 'universal' vision of history, and hence contribute to the inclusion of Britain in the universal Church, Merrills is a bit too keen to cast Bede in the chorus of late antique historians, such as Orosius, Jordanes or Isidore of Seville. The claim that geography was central to Bede's narrative and that Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* is 'the most accomplished union of historical and geographical themes in late antique writing' (309), seems to me an unnecessary exaggeration.

These reservations aside, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity* is an important book, clearly written, and full of thought-provoking ideas. Although I would have been more cautious as far as Bede's use of geography is concerned, Merrills' careful, perceptive and engaging discussions, as well as his firm grasp of the sources, both primary and secondary, make this book a major contribution to the study of late antique and early medieval historiography. Apart from being the first major study in the English language to tackle this issue, Merrills' book offers a fresh new look at some well-known and well-researched texts. Both students and scholars will find much that is valuable in this book, which deserves a very warm welcome indeed.

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Roger Bagnall (ed.), *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300-700*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. XII + 464 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-521-87137-2.

This book is the outcome of a symposium held in Dumbarton Oaks in 2004. An Introduction by Roger Bagnall (1-17) is followed by 20 contributions in 4 parts as well as by a short index (460-464). Some of the contributions include illustrations (see viii-xii for the list). Part I deals with 'The Culture of Byzantine Egypt'. It begins with 'Poets and Pagans in Byzantine Egypt' by Alan Cameron (21-46), who argues that there was no pagan resistance to Christianity in 5th century Egypt. There still were pagan philosophers, but no reliable evidence for militant pagans, with the only exception of the poet Pamprepus of Panopolis. The author examines in a critical way (perhaps too critical) an episode in the *Life of Severus* (patriarch of Antioch 512-518) by Zacharias Scholasticus, often adduced as evidence for the existence of an active pagan shrine as late as the 480's, and argues (27) that 'the one detail in Zacharias' account that rings true is the violence of the Christians'. As for 5th century Egyptian poets, none of them seems to have been a pagan, with the sole exception, once again, of Pamprepus. They wrote poetry imbued with pagan themes, but this was a matter of culture, not of religion. The predilection of members of their social class for mythological themes in the visual arts should be interpreted in the same way (for the use of such themes by artisans see Zsolt Kiss, 200-202). However, Christians with traditional cultural tastes ran the risk of being misunderstood as pagans. In 'Higher Education in Early Byzantine Egypt: Rhetoric, Latin, and the Law', Raffaella Cribiore (47-66) surveys changes in an educational system which was extremely conservative by modern standards. Latin language and Roman law were