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Van't Westeinde, Jessica: Roman Nobilitas in Jerome's Letters. Roman Values and Christian Asceticism for Socialites. – Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2021. 287 S. (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum, 127), geb. € 80,00 ISBN: 978-3-16-159343-7

In her doctoral thesis, Jessica van't Westeinde wants to problematize the embracement of Christian asceticism among late 4th and early 5th century Roman aristocrats. She specifically seeks to bring nuance to our understanding of the part that Jerome of Stridon played in this “transition”. Jerome's engagement with the Roman nobility and his appropriation of aristocratic ideals in correspondence with them is well known – however, this study questions precisely how *Christian* Jerome's “aristocratic” model of piety was. How much of a *transformation* was really involved for the wealthy persons who decided to embrace asceticism? The hypothesis of this book is that this transformation was not radical at all.

Turning against the grand narrative about the “conversion” of the aristocracy and specifically the idea of Jerome as representing a break between Roman society and Christian asceticism, W. calls for a change of methodological approach. She claims that our perception of a discontinuity between Roman society and asceticism has a lot to do with research assuming an “institutional perspective”, which focuses on works by authors who represented institutions and who had an interest in drawing clear boundaries between groups, masking a complex reality. Instead, the author assumes a perspective of “individual agency”, which, it is argued, will allow for more complexity.

In order to accomplish this, the author presents a “new methodology” which takes its main influence from the perspective of *Embodied Early and Medieval Christianity* (Markus Vinzent: “Embodied Early and Medieval Christianity: Challenging its ‘Canonical’ and ‘Institutional’ Origin”, in: *Religion in the Roman Empire* 2, 2016, 103–124). This approach aims at studying Christianity not from the institutional point of view, but from the bottom up. The focus of the study are individuals, not seen as mediators of institutional views, but as agents embodied in their contexts. It is from this understanding that Jerome, as well as the aristocrats with whom he corresponded, are approached.

The material that is analysed consists in letters written by Jerome to his “patron-students” (a term coined by the author and referring to the aristocratic correspondents being on the one hand financial benefactors of Jerome, and on the other hand disciples seeing him as a learned authority, 12). These patron-students are divided into *patricians* (belonging to the ancient aristocratic families and living in Rome) and *peripherals* (not belonging to an ancient family and residing in the provinces). There is also a division between junior and senior aristocrats. The chap.s of the book are divided according to these categorizations.

A close-text analysis is applied to the letters, discussing Jerome's rhetoric and asking whether the great change that he ascribes to the patron-students' choice of the ascetic life was matched by a radical real-life change. The analyses highlight how close Jerome's ways of expression, as well as the ideals that he constructs, are to the aristocratic context that the correspondents are supposed to "convert" from. The correspondents are praised for their pedigree as well as for their secular learning. W. points out the importance of non-Christian education in Jerome's letters, and how he sees this as required for biblical study.

Even values clearly connected to asceticism, such as virginity and chastity, were seen as ideals also in the aristocratic society in which these persons were "embedded". Thus, advices concerning celibacy did not, it is argued, imply a radical change, with exception to instances in which young persons did not marry and thus "risked" ending the family's bloodline.

The analyses likewise bring attention to differences between letters to different (kinds of) aristocratic addressees. The younger and the peripheral are approached in a pedagogical manner and exhorted to aim for perfection, while a senior patrician like the senator Pammachius is seen as already perfected. For Jerome's part, the author argues, the correspondence meant a possibility to climb the social ladder, by having noble correspondents seeking his advice.

The conclusion of the work is that the "conversion" of the Roman nobility was not much of a conversion at all; rather, in most regards, aristocratic life continued as usual. The ideals of being learned, living a chaste life and being charitable remained the same. Senior aristocrats did not totally renounce their wealth, they remained in their social positions and they kept their servants. The continuity is much more striking than the change.

A great benefit of this book is its clear purpose of challenging certain perceptions, and it brings well-needed nuance to our understanding of aristocratic Christianity at this time. All too often, modern scholarship has been caught up in ancient Christian categorizations and exaggerated differences between groups which were often not so clear. However, this does not make Jerome's model of piety any less *Christian* – the thing is, I argue, that what would be seen as essentially *Christian* was very much a mixture of elements from different cultures and religions.

As for the idea of *transformation*, which reappears throughout the analyses, the concept would have benefited from further clarification. Speaking of transformation in this context, we may be dealing with radical difference (which is how Jerome often presents it rhetorically) and we may be dealing with a reappropriation of aristocratic ideals (which implies both continuity and difference). I think that the latter is the best description of the relation between the "old" and "new" identities of these aristocrats. The fact that the same ideals are given a Christian *meaning* implies, I argue, a real change.

Although the book focuses on sociological aspects, it would have benefited from insights about Jerome's ascetic theology, above all anthropological ideas about transformation. These are shortly touched upon (157–158), but we are left wondering what parallels can be found between the Christian woman transcending her sex through asceticism, and the ideals of Roman nobility.

Concerning the ideal of education and learning, I certainly agree that Jerome's textual communities have much in common with the reading culture of Roman society, "with the exception that they [the aristocrats] now also read Scripture and theological treatises" (244). However, I think that this "exception" actually is quite important when it comes to the question of transformation. In Jerome's writings, reading is part of the regulated monastic life, and besides, it assumes an ascetic

character itself and is theologically interpreted as an essential part of the ascetic's spiritual development.

This is connected to the issue of the “individual agency” approach replacing the “institutional” approach. Jerome's personal wish to advance in Roman society does not take away from the fact that he was among the authors who contributed to the formation of late ancient and early medieval monasticism, and made education and learning an explicitly Christian enterprise. Even if we want to write history from the bottom up, embeddedness in a context could hardly exclude the impact of institutional interests. Jerome was deeply involved in his time's discourse of asceticism, not to speak of the discourse of orthodoxy, and this is of great importance for understanding why he expressed himself in the ways he did. Importantly, he did not only write *for* people, but also *against* people.

Thus, while I welcome the individual agency-approach taken, and definitely think that it brings new and important insights, I do not find it sufficient. We should probably be careful of seeing this and the “institutional” approach in terms of either/or. What the individual agency-perspective achieves is above all to complement a likewise needed institutional perspective.

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