

Der Briefwechsel des Paulinus von Nola. Kommunikation und soziale Kontakte zwischen christlichen Intellektuellen. By Sigrid Mratschek. (Hypomnemata. Untersuchungen zur Antike und zu ihrem Nachleben, 134). Pp. ix + 732 + colour frontispiece, 15 plates and 2 maps. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002. €99. 3 525 25232 3
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'Paulinus of Nola would not be the kind of candidate for biography that Peter Brown had shown Augustine to be' was the advice Robert Markus once gave a student who

was about to immerse himself in the enormous oeuvre of letters left by this aristocratic bishop of late antiquity (c. 354–431). The student, Dennis E. Trout, later published a valuable biography (Berkeley–London 1999) without trying to collate comprehensively the wealth of data found in Paulinus' letters, and to evaluate it entirely in order to reconstruct the new 'Christian society' built by Christian aristocrats at the time of Augustine. To achieve this, however, is the big task addressed by Sigrid Mratschek in this substantial contribution, and, to anticipate judgement, she has succeeded.

Paulinus became famous for renouncing the world and his enormous wealth in order to live the isolated life of an ascetic, and thus set an example for many an educated Roman in the fifth and sixth centuries. Looking at Paulinus' immense and laboriously drafted literary output presented here and connecting him with the Christian elite of the time, one cannot but be astonished that anyone could ever have reduced him to a lonesome and isolated hermit. People like him were also not subversive innovators responsible for the decay of classical Roman education, but rather carried it into the new medieval age at a time of great socio-cultural change. Mratschek's study also shows that Paulinus by no means gave up his control of money, resources and power, but rather used his wealth, relations and other connections in order to create an impressive and extensive 'aesthetic-cultural centre' around Felix's tomb in Nola which soon became the most important place of pilgrimage in Italy after Rome, eventually surpassing even Milan. In fact, Paulinus' influence certainly grew after his conversion, and pioneered a new 'career opportunity' for the Roman elite: that of *Adelsheiliger* (noble saint).

Not without humour, Mratschek portrays Paulinus as someone who introduced economic thinking into the whole salvation business. Indeed, Paulinus himself spoke about 'this spiritual transaction (*commercium spirituale*) when we sell our land and the Tenth in order to gain tax relief and eternal life in the Realm' (*ep.* xxxii) – a model that could nicely be conveyed to his wealthy and educated peers from the senatorial elite.

Paulinus considered his correspondence a most religious duty, a *religiosissimum officium* (*ep.* xxxiii.1). It enabled him to advocate a new concept of aristocratic life in which personal wealth and the maintenance of peer relations through the exchange of letters accompanied by rare animals or 'expensive fish sauces' was replaced by socialised wealth and the exchange of letters accompanied by uncomfortable monastic garments, relics and consecrated bread. In this respect it is worth noting that by identifying forty-three addressees as opposed to the twenty-six named in the relevant sources, Mratschek is able to demonstrate that Paulinus' network of correspondence was almost twice as extensive as hitherto presumed.

Paulinus brought with him St Felix, whose grave was at the centre of his community in Nola. Together, the powerful ascetic and the dead martyr became *bahnbrechend* (pace-setting) for a new, though not undisputed lifestyle and system of values. Thus they offered, in Paulinus' own words, a *pulchrum spectaculum* in the theatre of the world (*ep.* xiii). Most important, Paulinus knew how to convey this *spectaculum* to the world, and thus to form public opinion. His special relationship to Felix enabled Paulinus to establish his new values through 'supernatural authority' with considerable sociopolitical consequences.

Mratschek's meticulous investigation of the letters, their addressees and purposes brings to light several other interesting points. To name just one, a glance at the maps in this book reveals that Paulinus had virtually no contact with other like-minded Christians in the theological centres in the east with the sole exception of Bethlehem

where his correspondent Jerome lived. Moreover, in the beginning he was more or less isolated in Italy. His relationship with the Church at Rome appears to have been an especially uneasy one; his ambitions to build a 'second Rome' at Nola were not met with approval in the existing one. This did not disturb Paulinus' own explicit conviction that he was at the centre of a 'truly global' network of Christian intellectuals, and thus was able to express universal claims and values. These were not reserved for the rich and famous; as *amator pauperum*, Paulinus took great care to provide for the poorer and less educated pilgrims through lavish pictorial displays at Nola, and they reciprocated by spreading reports of the miracles happening at Felix's tomb and of Paulinus' holy life all over the world.

It is amazing that in this day and age a sociocultural survey of this kind can manage without any fashionable theory. The way in which Mratschek presents her immense data collection differs little from the approach of patristic monographs written a hundred years ago. On the one hand, this makes one ask why Mratschek shied away from risking more far-reaching conclusions about the anthropological mechanisms employed by the peer/non-peer system erected through Paulinus' network of correspondence and through his patron-client relations, or the sectarian dynamics and patterns of value-reversal within the Nola community. She hints at all these things without abandoning her strategy of simply presenting the evidence in a neutral, though refreshingly readable fashion. One could lament a missed opportunity. On the other hand, what we have is a serious handbook, which will be a powerful tool for anybody adventurous enough to risk such deliberations, and should thus be a part of any patristic library. However, there are major differences in her work to monographs of a hundred years ago: W. Riepl (*Das Nachrichten-wesen des Altertums*, Berlin 1913, 244) expressed the then common opinion that 'the letters published in late antiquity do not speak to us as directly and as animatedly as those by Seneca, Pliny, Fronto and Sidonius Apollinaris'. Anyone who has read this book will consider such a judgement redundant.

With his letters, Paulinus left us a wealth of insights into late ancient society, but also a deliberately new image of an ideal Christian life, a true *Leitbild* for later times – his own. It is thanks to Sigrd Mratschek that anyone interested in these issues can now profit more easily from these riches. In the words of Paulinus' contemporary Uranius 'Those who failed to see him in person desire at least to touch his letters' (*Epistola de obitu* 9, *PL* liii. 864).

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