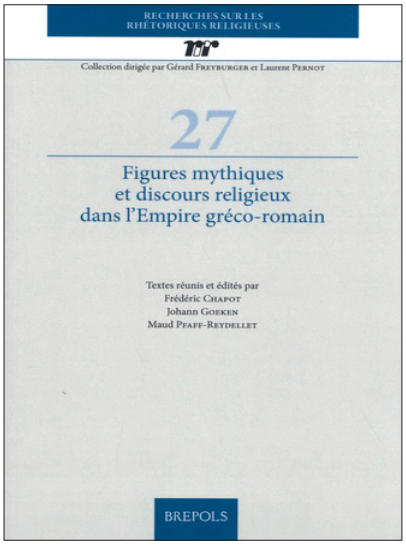
FIGURES MYTHIQUES ET DISCOURS RELIGIEUX



CHAPOT, FRÉDÉRIC, GOEKEN, JOHANN and PFAFF-REYDELLET, MAUD (eds.) (2018). *Figures mythiques et discours religieux dans l'Empire gréco-romain*. Recherches sur les rhétoriques religieuses 27. Turnhout: Brepols. 293 pp., 80,00€ [ISBN 978-2-5035-8079-1].

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THE TWO CENTRAL CONCEPTS WHICH MAKE UP the title of this collection of conference proceedings, *figures mythiques* and *discours religieux*, are rather ambiguous, so we need first of all some elucidation about the subject matter of this volume. What discourse about what figures? What specific questions tie the individual papers together? The *figures mythiques* are mythical beings (including divinities), whether historical or not (one might note that for the ancients themselves this distinction did not exist: to them all were historical), who have come to function as *figures exemplaires*, exemplary figures (*exempla*, *paradeigmata*) – indeed, it seems to me that both adjectives, *mythique* and *exemplaire*, should have been in the title. The reason given by the editors for using mythical instead of exemplary (p. 14) does not address the possibility of using both. The editors stress that what is on offer here is not a complete typol-

ogy of exemplary mythical beings – which of course could hardly be expected from inherently fragmented conference proceedings – but a starting point aiming to show the large variety of phenomena that come under this heading of exemplary beings. One could add that the phenomena themselves show variety as well, because they are shapeshifters: the contents and meaning of these *exempla* are constantly changing. The *discours religieux* of the title is religious discourse in its widest sense, embracing both *discours religieux* in a narrower sense (hymns, prayers, and so on) and *discours sur les religions* (the meta level of philosophical and exegetical texts, and the like). The discourse analyzed here is limited to the imperial period but embraces Christian authors (1st to 5th cent. CE; in fact, 6th cent. and beyond).

The volume consists of an introduction and 17 papers, ranging from 7 to 19 pages in length, distributed evenly across five sections. It is based on a colloquium held November 20-21, 2014, in Strasbourg. 2014 also seems the cut-off data for the final redaction of most papers by their authors: there are a mere three references to literature published after 2014 (out of the 400 titles in the consolidated bibliography at the end). Consequently, references to important titles are lacking, such as Newby, Z. (2016). *Greek Myths in Roman Art and Culture: Imagery, Values and Identity in Italy, 50 BC–AD 250*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Aygon, J.-P., Noacco, C. and Bonnet, C. (eds.) (2016). *La mythologie de l'Antiquité à la modernité: Appropriation-Adaptation-Détournement*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes; Zucker, A., Fabre-Serris, J., Tilliette, J.-Y. and Besson, G. (eds.) (2016). *Lire les mythes. Formes, usages et visées des pratiques mythographiques de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance*. Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion; Petitfils, J. (2016). Mos Christianorum. *The Moral Discourse of Exemplarity and the Jewish and Christian Language of Leadership*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck; and Vitale, M. (2017). *Das Imperium in Wort und Bild. Römische Darstellungsformen beherrschter Gebiete in Inschriftenmonumenten, Münzprägungen und Literatur*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner (esp. relevant for the paper of Marco Fucecchi, cf. below). Too late by any account were Roller, M.B. (2018). *Models from the Past in Roman Culture. A World of Exempla*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Pierzak, D. (2018). References to Historical Figures as a Means of Persuasion in Ancient Rhetoric. A Research Methodology Applicable to Cicero. *Scripta Classica*, 15, pp. 13-35. But both are warmly recommended. Whether these and other titles would have been included even if there had been a systematic attempt to include references to publications up to (and including?) 2017, is another matter, to which we will return below.

Conference proceedings are often a very mixed bag and whatever structure there is, is obviously an afterthought, with individual papers more or less forcibly fitted into some thematic arrangement. Now here we have got an edited volume of

which the structure seems well-thought out. The five sections make sense. In addition to the rather short general introduction, each of the five sections has a helpful introduction by the three editors. But after reading the papers, the division in sections and the distribution of the papers across them, does not appear to be so compelling after all. What is, however, most convenient is that within the sections every paper has clearly marked paragraphs (except the one by Merckel) and that most end with an explicit conclusion. Also, the accessibility of the volume is guaranteed by the presence of three indices: an *index locorum*, an index of proper names and an extremely useful index of concepts.

Part 1 deals with the construing of exemplary figures: "la fabrique d'une mémoire", whether based in some historical occurrence and subsequently "mythified", or the product of an allegorical process, or both. Anthony Andurand and Corinne Bonnet address the presence of Plato, as *theios Platon* in banquet literature, from Plutarch to Athenaeus; Gérard Freyburger takes a closer look at M. Attilius Regulus, the self-sacrificing hero of the 1st Punic War, and concludes that his strength as an *exemplum* derives from his essential historicity; Cécile Merckel discusses exemplary figures in Seneca with an interesting tension between the Stoic philosopher and the playwright. Part 2 is about the exemplary figure as a *passeur*, an intermediary, between the divine and the mundane. Catherine Notter and Igor Yakoubovitch take as their subject Hercules in the Flavian period: this ambiguous individual, between man and god, becomes ever more a model for the emperor; Mina Tasseva Bencheva looks at Pythagoras and Orpheus as *exempla* of wisdom and religious authority: as authors of *hieroi logoi* they are seen as mirroring those involved in religious discourse, even when they are Jews or Christians; Benoît Mounier analyses how Hieronymus of Sidon sets up Old Testament prophets as positive exemplars against Plato as a negative one. Part 3 is about context: exemplary figures derive their meaning from their place within a network of such figures. Anne-Catherine Baudoin concludes that Pontius Pilate is not compared to heroes or rulers of old but to contemporary ones. In the process, he shifts from negative to positive *exemplum*. Giovanna Laterza looks at the place of king Numa in the catalogue of heroes in *Aeneid* Book 6, and Maud Pfaff-Reydellet shows how the context within which Numa figures, in this case Ovid, contributes to the creation of the *exemplum* and makes Numa into an intermediary between Romans and the gods. Sylvia Estienne studies the (in)famous excursus added to Servius' commentary on the *Aeneid* about the *septem pignora quae imperium Romanum tenent*, the "pledges" – guarantors – of Roman rule, such as the *palladium* en the *ancille* – a subject rather wider than exemplary beings, despite her partial focus on the ashes of Orestes. Part 4 is about *plasticité*, the mutability and adaptability of exemplary figures. This explains

their effectiveness: their malleability enables them to be used in completely different contexts. Marco Fucecchi discusses Claudian, especially his *Bellum Gildonicum* (carm. 15) and concludes that the divine personifications function as intermediaries between the divine emperor and the old Olympian gods; Céline Urlacher-Becht analyses the story of Hercules and Antaeus in the work of Ennodius of Padua (early 6th cent.). As a member of Roman nobility and a Christian, Ennodius seeks to give voice to both these sides of his personality and produces two different versions of same story. Christiane Helene Voigt studies the reception of Alexander the Great in early Arab sources, including the Quran (6th-7th cent.). Part 5 is about the persistence of pagan exemplary figures into Christian days. Régis Courtray, in one of the best papers, discusses Jerome and pagan literary learning: should it be banished or put to Christian use? Even if he sometimes seems to argue for the opposite, he makes much use of mythology, *fabula poetarum* as he calls it. He can use, and wants to use, the *fabula* because he turns them into testimonies for the Christian faith. Francesco Massa, much at home here in his specific field of expertise, speaks of Dionysus as possibly rivaling Christ in the 4th-cent. polemical exchanges; Christians and pagans use the same material, but the Christians arrive at a diabolical Dionysus – and win the day because of political support; Michele Cutino discusses Ambrose and the uses he makes of mythological figures, concluding that mythology forms an essential and constitutive element of Ambrose's writings; Frédéric Chapot deals with the creation of new *exempla*, i.c. the virginal heroine as one of the most potent categories of martyrdom, and how this leads to a re-evaluation of past models.

Even from these very short notices, which do not enough credit to the individual papers, it will be obvious that the division into sections does not really work. Many if not most papers deal with *construction* (section 1) and *plasticité* (section 4) – indeed, these very words appear in several papers. It seems to be in the nature of an *exemplum* to be shaped and reshaped in a continuous process; if the process stops, the *exemplum* will soon cease to be an *exemplum*: it needs to be relevant to the public that it is aimed at. In fact, *construction* and *plasticité* seem to be more or less the same thing. Intermediaries we find in sections 2 and 4 and are implicit in several papers. Christians make an appearance in four out of five sections, not just section 5. This is not to say that I would know how to better arrange these papers, maybe a simple chronological order would be adequate, or should we try some typology of exemplary figures after all? Some authors seem to consider history and myth as exclusive categories: in the presence of a possible historical nucleus they argue that the figure they study is only "partly mythical". Mythical, largely mythical, somewhat mythical, historical… one might ask: does it matter? Does it make a difference as far

as the functioning as an *exemplum* is concerned? Maybe this question itself could be used to structure a series of enquiries into such *exempla*.

Considering the recurring notion of "making memories" in these papers (see "la fabrique d'une mémoire", already quoted above) I find it strange that all reference to studies of memory (invented tradition, *lieux de mémoires*, and so on) is lacking. E.g., Galinsky, K. (ed.) (2016). *Memory in Ancient Rome and Early Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, and two previous volume on memory edited by the same, are quite relevant. A reason for this omission might be that a lot of recent literature on memory is in English. When we look at the bibliography of the volume under review, Anglo-Saxon scholarly output is much underrepresented. This is not a complaint against francophone scholars who do not read English. It is rather a sign of the times, a sign that I find disconcerting: on the one hand there is an opening up to the outside world with English as the *lingua franca* (which leaves non-native speakers of English on the back foot), but on the other hand, quite paradoxically, I also see a withdrawal into closed language communities; I see students that do not have command of the major European languages – except English, although often overconfident about their command of that language; I see libraries (in the Netherlands) devoid of any recent literature in either German or the romance languages. Overall, I find that the present often compares rather negatively to the internationally oriented scholarly communities of the 20th cent.

Interesting as the individual papers are, the one obviously more than the other, my most important point of critique would be that discourse here is so very much intellectual discourse, the ideas of mythographers, apologists, of those who made discourse their profession. The title might be considered misleading because in this day and age "discourse" could be expected to be conceived of wider than as "learned speculation", and to include so-called lived religion: religious practice, which of course has its own discourse. With our exemplary figures we can think of epigraphic evidence for the divinity of and cult for such beings. Of course, one should never criticize a book for not doing what you would have liked it to do. But the introduction did make the distinction between *discours religieux*, in a narrow sense, and *discours sur religion*. The first made hardly any appearance at all: no hymns, no prayers, not a single inscription or papyrus referenced. Might there be a companion volume planned? Or are the many volumes on prayer and hymns in the series Recherches sur les Rhétoriques Religieuses (RRR) to be considered as such? Looking at those volumes and at the way the RRR series is advertised, one might be forgiven for expecting a wide perspective: the series is about "language used to communicate with and about the supernatural and one's relationship with the supernatural" in order "to open new avenues for research", "ouvrir des voies nou-

velles". Of course, there is nothing wrong with studying Ovid, Seneca, Jerome and Ambrose. But I sincerely think it is preferable to look at different aspects of ancient society, the "ordinary" and the "meta" level, together, in order to take into account the other 99 percent.