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Peter Van Nuffelen, *Orosius and the Rhetoric of History*

Orosius and the Rhetoric of History by Van Nuffelen, Peter

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are beyond the scope of the book, but his insistence that “there are strict limits to innovations that can be introduced into the collective memory of any group” (186) does not provide a critical basis for sorting authentic Jesus material from inauthentic material in such texts.

McIver’s marginalization of the synoptic problem and its widely accepted solution unfortunately renders the book too confusing to recommend as a textbook, but specialists interested in the role of memory in the preservation of Christian traditions may nonetheless find his first part to be a source of stimulating ideas. In particular, his findings suggest that the first few years after the crucifixion were probably the most crucial in fixing these traditions within the memories of their tradents. If this book encourages scholars to focus more on Christianity between Jesus and Paul, then it will have made a positive contribution to the field.

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VAN NUFFELEN, PETER. *Orosius and the Rhetoric of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 252 pp. \$110.00 (cloth).

Around 414 CE, an Iberian presbyter named Orosius appeared in the seaside city of Hippo in North Africa. He seems to have come there to join the entourage of Hippo’s increasingly powerful bishop, Augustine. His plan worked. Within a few years, he was commissioned to write the *Historiae adversus paganos*, a complement to his master’s *City of God* (also “against the pagans”). Scholarship has received the *Historiae* less warmly than Augustine’s work. Orosius has often been read, uncharitably, as a Christian propagandist who tried to popularize an overly rosy view of his age by plagiarizing from previous historians and aping their classical style. Seen in that light, his text was doomed to fall by the wayside.

Peter Van Nuffelen, however, thinks that there is a more productive way to read the *Historiae*. Instead of disparaging Orosius’s optimism, Van Nuffelen asks us to attend to how he was making a critical intervention into ancient historiography by appropriating its rhetorical tools. By taking Orosius’s narration of the past as an exercise in rhetoric, rather than as a high-minded “theology of history” (9), we might be able to better appreciate its place in the history of late ancient historiography.

Van Nuffelen begins by laying out some of the assumptions that distort our view of Orosius. First there is our tendency to classify pagan historiography as history proper, while histories written by Christians are relegated to the propaganda pile. Then there is the idea that Orosius had to somehow live up to Augustine’s *City of God*, with its undermining of the *saeculum*. In comparison, Orosius’s sunny optimism about the glories of the *tempora Christiana* could only seem juvenile. Against this, Van Nuffelen suggests that both Augustine and Orosius waver between an emphasis on providence’s favoring of Christians and an acceptance of their bleak situation. The final distortion comes from our desire to unearth a theology of history from beneath the lines of Orosius’s *Historiae*. Van Nuffelen contends that what motivated Orosius’s text was not some grand theory, but rather the rhetorical conventions of historiography in late antiquity (10–15). A more reasonable reception of the *Historiae* would then depend on our correcting these distortions in order to see Orosius as he was: a historian in the classical mold, writing according to rhetorical norms rather than Augustinian theories (18–24).

The book then proceeds to sketch out a less distorted outline of the *Historiae*. In chapter 1, Van Nuffelen shows us Orosius’s grounding in rhetorical training, and especially in the art of deploying Vergil with aplomb. Chapters 2–6 then build on this foundation by pointing out the various rhetorical devices Orosius used in order

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to undermine the glorifying portrait of Roman history as it was taught in the rhetorical schools of his day. When he alluded to the *Aeneid*, he did so not just to add literary flavor, but to subtly question the notion that the eternal city would last forever (53–61). When he invoked the fabled exempla of Rome's past (82–92) or recited well-known Roman histories (111–14), he was not simply plagiarizing, but rather reversing the old laudatory function of these sources and reshaping them for his own purposes. And even when he used *enargeia* to make his audience feel the horrors of the past (116–22) or broke out into the exultations of panegyric (151–53), he was still operating within the accepted norms of rhetorical historiography in late antiquity. Instead of accusing him of being too literary, and therefore not sufficiently historical, we should instead attend to how Orosius was “using rhetoric to question rhetoric” (124).

After running through the range of Orosius's rhetorical tools, Van Nuffelen takes up a more defensive stance in his seventh chapter. Here he shifts from a summary of what Orosius said to the issue of what he did not say. Whereas previous scholars had often tried to read a universal history out of Orosius, Van Nuffelen is reluctant to do so. Wherever there seems to be a grand theory in the *Historiae*, he suggests that we are better off taking it as a rhetorical move, adopted strategically and without view to any possible extrapolation (174–76). This section acts as the culmination of an argument that Van Nuffelen begins constructing in chapter 2, which he pithily summarizes there as: “Historians are not philosophers” (62).

Finally, in chapter 8, we return to the relationship between Orosius and Augustine. It turns out that they are not as far apart as they might seem. In general, Orosius is happy to borrow from the *City of God* and to leave Augustine's theology of history unchallenged. And, like Augustine, his goal is to emphasize God as the primary agent, looming over the temporal actors that populated most other ancient histories (195–97). What distinguishes the two most clearly, however, is their difference in genre. Whereas Augustine gives us an operatic brand of apologetic, Orosius is content to stay within the confines of ancient historiography. And while we must admit that Orosius remains more optimistic than Augustine about their shared era of history, we should not let that dominate our view of the *Historiae*. In the end, this remains Van Nuffelen's main motivation: not to prove that Orosius was somehow better than we thought, but to suggest that we more soberly contextualize his work within the rhetorical conditions under which he wrote (24).

This thesis is both sound and cautious, though its caution might keep Van Nuffelen's book from finding a broader audience. It does a good job of correcting some overstatements in Orosius scholarship to date, but it does less well at convincing the reader why she might want to spend much time on the *Historiae*. Perhaps Van Nuffelen could have included more constructive reflections pointing to potential topics for future conversation. One form this might take would be a more sustained engagement with contemporary debates about historical narrative. Some of the sections of Van Nuffelen's book (e.g., “Exploring the Limits of Narrative” [132–37]) seem to hint at such an encounter, but they seldom result in a sophisticated discussion of historiography as it stands today. Including authors like Hayden White in the footnotes is a promising gesture, but the reader is left wondering what Orosius's work might have to say to White's critique of narrative or Dominick LaCapra's thoughts about history and rhetoric. Still, this might simply fall outside the mandate of Van Nuffelen's book, which remains a compelling contribution to the study of history writing in late antiquity.

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