
Paulinus of Nola (c. AD 352-431) has always been a figure of fascination. Born into a noble and extremely rich family in Gallo-Roman Aquitaine, Paulinus renounced a successful political career, and the traditional lifestyle of the Late Roman elite, to ‘live for Christ’. In 395 he settled just outside the town of Nola, in Italian Campania. There his wealth and considerable literary talents were dedicated to the service of Felix, the confessor-saint of the region, whose shrine Paulinus had first visited as a *puer* decades before. The letters and poems that Paulinus left behind provide priceless information both on his times, especially the years 395-408, and on those to whom he wrote, including Jerome, Rufinus of Aquileia, Sulpicius Severus and Augustine of Hippo.

And yet, before this work of Dennis Trout no major biography of Paulinus had ever been attempted. As Trout himself observes, ‘the “private” Paulinus’ (xiii) has remained elusive. Rather than focus on the man himself, scholars have mined Paulinus’ works for material on a wide range of Late Roman themes. The rise of western asceticism, the promotion of the cults of the saints and their relics, the ‘christianization’ of the later Empire and the elite values of *amicitia* and euergetism, the Origenist and Pelagian theological controversies: all can be illuminated through the writings of Paulinus of Nola. It is Trout’s achievement to bring all these elements together in one work. Rejecting the temptation to impose an overall ‘pattern’ (269) on these varied themes, Trout emphasises the complexity of the ‘many-sided self of Paulinus’ (22), which reflects Paulinus’ transitional and often contradictory age.

After the introduction, chs.2-4 trace Paulinus’ career before his renunciation of the world in late 394. This is a notoriously difficult task, for almost all Paulinus’ extant works date to after this period, and Trout does very well in placing Paulinus in his social setting. Educated by Ausonius of Bordeaux (who in 366/7 would become tutor to the future emperor Gratian, and whose patronage greatly aided Paulinus’ career), Paulinus became suffect consul in c. 378 and governor of Campania in c. 380-1 (see Appendix B for further discussion of the complex chronology
of these offices). He then retired into aristocratic *otium ruris* in Aquitaine and then Spain, before his final decision to reject the world of secular politics and return to the shrine of Felix in Campania, which he had already visited and patronised in his term as governor.

Trout’s analysis of the chronological issues raised by Paulinus’ early career is impressive, but some caution is needed in reading his account of these years. He places great emphasis on Paulinus’ probable connections to other known Roman nobles of this period, particularly Aurelius Symmachus and Petronius Probus, and to leading bishops such as Ambrose of Milan. It is certainly possible that Paulinus may have interacted with such men, and Trout does admit his arguments are speculative (42, 44), but the reader needs to realise just how speculative they are. Trout’s statement that it is ‘virtually certain’ (36; cf. 113) that Paulinus was in contact with Symmachus rests purely on Symmachus’ known correspondence with other friends of Ausonius, for no letter by either man to the other survives. And Trout’s conviction that Paulinus ‘spent time in Milan’ (49) and thus ‘knew Ambrose well’ (60) likewise rests on no solid foundation. That Augustine’s friend Alypius heard Paulinus’ name mentioned in Milan in 384, which is the only evidence Trout can muster, hardly proves that Paulinus ‘must have been in the city not long before’ (49).

Trout then describes Paulinus’ life at Nola in a series of ‘thematic’ chapters (5-9). These are the most valuable sections of the book, although there are some notable omissions in the arguments he makes. The start of ch.5 places Paulinus against the background of the political and military crises that dominated the early fifth century western empire. But Trout never seriously discusses the claims of earlier scholars (see in particular W.H.C. Frend, ‘The Two Worlds of Paulinus of Nola’ in J.W. Binns, ed., *Latin Literature of the Fourth Century*, London 1974, 100-133) that the withdrawal of talented noblemen like Paulinus from secular affairs helped provoke those crises. Certainly Paulinus rejected serving even a Christian emperor as incompatible with serving Christ (*Epistle* 8, 25.1). He supported those evading military service (*Carmen* 19.445), and declared that only ‘those who have no confidence in Christ as Bearer of salvation must put their trust in legions and repair their walls as a defence prepared
for refuge' (*Carmen* 26.105). Such a doctrine of inactivity could have had serious implications, and deserves further analysis.

The second half of that chapter discusses Paulinus’ role in the development of western Christian asceticism, and here Trout is particularly impressive. He emphasises that in this period, although ‘certain principles were widely accepted as defining the ascetic life ... their implementation varied greatly’ (128). The monastic community that Paulinus established at Nola thus played a part in ‘the evolution of western monasticism’ (132), a century before the Benedictine Rule established the first systematic guidelines for monastic institutions in the west. Trout might have considered how Paulinus’ approach may have influenced that later Rule, but his essential argument is convincing and significant.

Chapter 6 analyses in detail Paulinus’ attitude to wealth, and what Trout refers to as ‘salvation economics’ (133). He makes the important point that Paulinus did not actually condemn owning wealth as such, nor did he relinquish all of his own possessions (135). Instead, Paulinus’ recurring theme is that ‘it is not riches but men’s use of them which is blameworthy or acceptable to God’ (*Epistle* 13.20). Concerned by the Gospel warning that ‘it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 19.24), Paulinus’ solution was for the rich to use their wealth for the benefit of the poor, as he himself did at Nola. As Trout observes, this solution was one that would have suited other members of the elite (136). Paulinus’ great building and charitable work at Nola in fact simply represent a Christian redirection of traditional upper class patronage and euergetism, and Trout repeatedly comments on ‘how easily the traditional forms of aristocratic life and evolving Christian practices could accommodate each other’ (45; cf. 89 and 197).

However, Trout might have considered how Paulinus’ view of wealth compares to those of others of his time, notably the more radical Ambrose, and the conservative Augustine. Paulinus was particularly influenced by a great fear of the Last Judgement. The image of the rich man who scorned the poor Lazarus burning in hell (Luke 16.25) recurs constantly in Paulinus’ Letters (*Epistles* 13; 25*; 32; 34) and Poems (*Carmina* 17; 21; 24; 31), and he worried constantly that on the last day he would be
'weighed down with material possessions' (Carmen 10.304). This dread that 'eternal flame will torture body and soul' (Epistle 40.12) is particularly strong in his writings at the time of his renunciation of his old life in 394-5 (see above all Carmen 10, in which he tries to explain his actions to Ausonius). Such concerns must have influenced Paulinus' attitude to wealth and its use, and merit attention that this book does not provide.

Like many scholars, Trout generally does not consider the difficult question of what a man like Paulinus may have actually believed. But to try to understand the motivation and ideas of such an individual, who rejected his own world to turn to Christ, some consideration of his beliefs is essential. This problem is perhaps most visible in Trout's otherwise excellent analysis of how Paulinus presented and used the cult of Saint Felix of Nola (ch.7). Clearly influenced by the work of Peter Brown, as he himself acknowledges (161 n.11), Trout notes how important it was to Paulinus' own status at Nola to declare himself the special devotee of Felix—'a saint's impresario' (161). Yet the very foundation of Paulinus' attitude to Felix was his personal devotion to the saint. Such devotion is something Trout only mentions in passing (e.g. at 173), and his emphasis on Paulinus' manipulation of Felix's cult needs to be tempered by a stronger recognition of the genuine conviction that lay behind Paulinus' actions.

Trout then proceeds to illustrate how Paulinus promoted Felix as an intercessor between the people of Nola and heaven. The early fifth century saw a great rise in the cults of saints and relics, and in this process Paulinus had considerable influence. In Nola, Felix took the place of the old pagan tutelary deity of the town (176-7). Paulinus' Natalicia (poems composed for the annual festival commemorating Felix's death, and thus his birth in heaven) reveal old customs of animal sacrifice still being promoted but in a new form (179-180). The local people now turned to Felix for healing, or for aid finding lost animals, and de voto offerings were given in thanks to the saint, not to the old gods. As Trout demonstrates very strongly in these pages, the line between Christian and pagan customs in this period could be very blurred indeed.
Chapter 8 continues this theme, demonstrating other instances of the Christian transformation of traditional ideas. One case is Paulinus’ conception of *amicitia*, so fundamental to Late Roman upper-class society (209). Paulinus presented the bond between Christians as on a higher plane than the older ideas on friendship of Cicero and Seneca that still influenced men like Symmachus. For all Christians formed one body with Christ, and so Christian *amicitia* did not depend on physical presence but united even men who would never actually meet, such as Paulinus and Augustine. Other Christian interpretations of old ideas can be seen in Paulinus’ modification of traditional poetic genres, the *epithalamium* (marriage poem: *Carmen* 25), *consolatio* (*Carmen* 31) and *propemptikon* (farewell poem: *Carmen* 17) (213). Trout also gives a valuable summary in this section of the leading figures with whom Paulinus was in contact, including clerics like Augustine, and leading Roman noble ascetics, notably the Elder and Younger Melanias.

It was partly through such connections that Paulinus was drawn into the great western theological disputes of this period: the Origenist and Pelagian controversies. Paulinus was not a controversialist, but Trout demonstrates that he was not theologically unlearned, as some have assumed (218-9). Thus his writings can help shed light on these bitter conflicts (229). The Pelagian issue of whether salvation was achieved through divine grace alone or through good works and correct living was of particular concern to Paulinus, although his writings are ambiguous on what is an extremely difficult subject (234). However, the Pelagian controversy reached its peak after 410, by which time our evidence on Paulinus is again very poor. Trout gives a good summary in chapter nine of what little is known of Paulinus’ last decades, and he also discusses the description of Paulinus’ death in 431 in Uranius’ *De obitu sancti Paulini*, a work he helpfully prints in translation in Appendix D.

In trying to cover so many different themes, Trout has inevitably needed to stretch himself rather thin, and in many ways the excellent later chapters are more valuable individually than the book as a whole. Bringing together so many important issues in one work is a major achievement, but Trout says little of Paulinus the man, and explicitly renounces the opportunity to try to create a fuller overall picture of this complex figure (269). Still, as Trout himself states, this work was never
meant to be the final word on the subject of Paulinus of Nola. 'In the end, this study can be only one more claim on Paulinus and his complex late-Roman world. I trust it ... encourages further assessment' (269). This he has certainly achieved.

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