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Designing Identity: The Power of Textiles in Late Antiquity

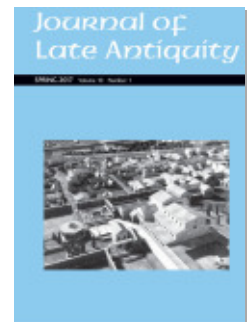
ed. by Thelma K. Thomas (review)

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Pucci, contain “[t]he philosophic basis for recuperation [. . .] in Augustine’s notion of verbal mimesis” (128): as language in general, poetic words can convey falsehood and truth. In the last chapter (“*De doctrina christiana: Recuperation and Charity*,” 140–178), Pucci shows how the concept of recuperation, developed at Cassiciacum, fits with and is continued in Augustine’s teaching on redemption as a way from paganism to Christianity, and thus to truth. The book ends with a chronological list of poetic quotations in the Cassiciacum dialogues, an index and a bibliography.

Looking at *Augustine’s Vergilian Retreat* as a whole, one can first say that Pucci is innovative and helpful in drawing the reader’s attention to Augustine’s repeated meta-intertextual remarks on the reading of Virgil during the stay at Cassiciacum and in the dialogues taking place there. Partially, the author offers exciting reinterpretations of Augustine’s hermeneutic semantics (e.g. 59–68). On the other hand, however, he does not pay much attention to the philological details of individual quotations. Just to give an example: Dealing with Augustine’s quotation (*De beata vita* 4.25 *verissima est enim illa sententia: nam tu quod vitare possis, stultum admittere est.*) of Terence, *Eunuchus* 761 *tu quod cauere possis, stultum admittere est* (79–81), the author neither discusses the change of the wording nor the question whether, as Pucci supposes, a reader can be expected to re-contextualize a moral commonplace (“if you can avoid an evil, do so”) within the notoriously complicated plot of a comedy. This does, of course, not weaken the general line of argumentation (in fact, the quotation fits with Augustine’s philosophical purpose at this point), nevertheless, the inspired interpretation could here and

in many other cases have been supported by some reflections concerning the philological aspects of intertextuality. There is, of course, scholarship dealing with these questions, which might have been taken into account. The bibliography lists titles which are not actually referred to, e.g. G.A. Müller’s important book *Formen und Funktionen der Vergilzitate bei Augustin von Hippo* (Paderborn, 2003). Furthermore, the pedagogic recuperation of Virgil at Cassiciacum which Pucci tries to outline could also have been examined against the background of the earlier Christian appropriation of Virgil—strategies of recuperation of Virgil can already be found in Minucius Felix and Lactantius. But on the other hand, one must confess that one of the several assets of Pucci’s book is its clear focus. The most important innovation made in Pucci’s book is his pedagogic reading of the Cassiciacum dialogues and the use of Virgil and, more generally, the pagan poetry within them. Thus, Pucci gives an impressive example of how Christian thinking has been cultivated on a pagan cultural substrate.

Designing Identity: The Power of Textiles in Late Antiquity

THELMA K. THOMAS, ED.

Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016.

ISBN: 978-0691169422

Reviewed by Mary Harlow
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This exhibition catalog contains excellent colour illustrations, catalog information, and accompanying scholarly chapters. It will appeal to a wide audience of textile archaeologists, specialists in Late Antiquity, museum curators, collectors, and art historians as well as to those with a general interest in the past and in textile art.

The first section, “Textiles for Clothing and Furnishings: Putting Late Antique Roman Society on Display” is introduced by Thomas’s chapter on “Material Meaning in Late Antiquity,” which discusses how textiles, both within the household and on the body, help form the cultural identities of individuals and groups. Noting the role of curtains and soft furnishing in transforming the social spaces of the late antique house, Thomas provides commentary on the symbolism and implications of certain iconographic programs, such as the continued use of images of Penelope as a motif interweaving textile production and female virtue, and the pervasiveness and polyvalent use of Dionysus and Dionysian imagery. The article illustrates how textiles can be used to create a range of ambiances and to render a single space multi-functional, depending on the needs of the household.

The multiplicity of meaning that can be ascribed to particular images is also part of Jennifer Ball’s discussion of “Charms: Protective and Auspicious Motifs.” Ball highlights the use of certain symbols, such as knots, the cross/ankh, and vegetal imagery, which act as charms to ward off evil and the attract prosperity— noting the prevalence of amuletic motifs on children’s clothing, especially borders and cuffs where evil may enter the body.

In “The Continuity of Late Antique Patterns,” Evans focusses on the interplay between continuity, tradition and innovation as reflected in items from Egyptian burial context now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Intricately woven vines and vegetal motifs which make reference to prosperity and abundance; hunters or soldiers, and exotic animals illustrate the employment of Dionysiac imageries, motifs that, according to Evans, came to represent commonly held notions of “the good life,” and lost their associations

with paganism. As a case-study of the new cultural and religious dispensation introduced by Islamic aesthetics, Evans uses depiction of the eight-pointed star.

The first section ends with a short chapter, again by Thomas, on “Making Textiles and Assessing their Value” which describes some of the techniques of textile production, from the cultivation of raw material through to the end product. This is an essential part of assessing the value and craftsmanship of textiles and of understanding the key role they played in the economic, cultural and visual world of Late Antiquity.

The second section, “Late Antique Textiles in Modern Times: Collecting and Collections,” considers the fate of some collections in US museums. Writing on curtain hangings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Kondoleon expands many of the points made by Thomas by stressing the need to view the architectural space of the late antique house as an expression of the owner’s world and his place within it. She draws attention to the shared iconographic repertoire of workshops in different media (weavers, wall painters, and mosaicists), all effectively used to create the overall effect. Kondoleon argues that textile fragments, particularly those on which imaginary colonnades are woven, are part of the desire to create an illusion of space and lightness effected also through wall paintings. Weavers of textiles could create imagery which played with real and pictorial space, with images that were idealised or realistic. Textile designs could defined space but also blurred boundaries, it could serve as decoration yet also present highly symbolic imagery.

In “Collecting and Exhibiting Late Antique Textiles at the Brooklyn Museum,” Bleiberg offers a brief overview of the fortune of this collection. It seems

to have fared far better when under the care of ethnographer Stewart Culin in the 1920s than it has subsequently, despite the creation of a permanent gallery of Coptic Art in 1943. Culin had encouraged engagement with contemporary fashion and textile designers, forging links with commerce through display-windows in the department store of Abraham & Straus in Brooklyn. This approach was discontinued when the collection moved from the ethnographic to the Egyptian collection, where Late Antique items were considered of lesser importance (value?) than Pharaonic or Classical Greek and Roman art. Despite this, Coptic textiles proved popular enough to allow for the installation of the first permanent gallery of late antique art in 1943. Sadly, since 1997, they have not been on display. It seems that the original curator, Culin, was remarkably prescient in his view of how museums could engage with contemporary society.

A similar story is recorded by Dospel Williams in “Minor Art, Major Works: An Overview of the Dumbarton Oaks’ Collection of Late Antique and Medieval Textiles.” Begun in the late 1920s by collectors Robert and Mildred Bliss Woods, this collection includes remarkable pieces, such as the Hestia Polyolbos hanging. As tastes changed, the collection was overshadowed by other forms of Byzantine Art. Williams draws attention to another Bliss project, “The Census of Byzantine Textiles in North America” (1938–1943), still available as a resource, and to the forthcoming publication of a new online catalogue edited by Gudrun Bühl, together with Elizabeth Williams.

Ratcliff addresses “Collecting Late Antique textiles at the Metropolitan Museum of Art” which, like that at the Brooklyn Museum, had an early association with the education of textile artisans

and with textile manufacturers. In the 1930s textiles from late antiquity were moved into the new galleries for Near Eastern Art and consequently given little attention until the 1990s when the creation of new galleries for Byzantine Art, and two exhibitions (Textiles of Late Antiquity 1995 and Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition, 2011) have raised awareness of textiles as key artefacts of the period.

The final chapter, by Colburn takes “A Closer Look at Textiles from the Collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Materials and Techniques” and draws together the threads of the entire volume, by offering a detailed analysis of several textiles from the Metropolitan Museum including discussions of the design, craftsmanship, weaving techniques, dyes and colors. The volume ends with a glossary and a checklist of exhibits which detail, size (a key detail, often missing in the captions within the volume), provenance, and current museum holding identifier.

Defining Identity is an excellent volume, beautifully illustrated, full of high quality scholarship and a perfect substitute for those not able to visit the exhibition.

Literary Territories: Cartographical Thinking in Late Antiquity

SCOTT FITZGERALD JOHNSON
Oxford and New York: Oxford
University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv + 195.
978-0-19-022123-2

Reviewed by Georgia Frank
(Colgate University)

In *Literary Territories*, Scott Johnson explores the intertwined metaphors of map and library as they shaped the production of literature in late antiquity. Much of the book focuses on the fourth