

Stenger, Jan: *Hellenische Identität in der Spätantike. Pagane Autoren und ihr Unbehagen an der eigenen Zeit*. Berlin u.a.: de Gruyter 2009. ISBN: 978-3-11-021328-7; X, 424 S.

Rezensiert von: Lieve Van Hoof, Postdoctoral Research Fellow of the Research Foundation – Flanders / Visiting Member of the Corpus Christi Classics Centre, Oxford

Over the last couple of years, the construction of identities in Late antiquity, particularly along religious lines, has become a popular topic in Late antique studies. One can think, for example, of recent books by scholars such as Aaron Johnson, Antony Kaldellis, Isabella Sandwell, Jeremy Scott, or Niketas Siniosoglou. Jan Stenger's book on „Hellenische Identität in der Spätantike“ studies this phenomenon in pagan fourth century Greek texts, mainly by Julian, Libanius, Themistius, Eunapius, Himerius, and Oribasius. More specifically, as he states in his introduction (Chapter 1), Stenger wants to study, „wie die paganen Autoren im Osten des vierten Jahrhunderts ihre eigene Zeit wahrnahmen und wie sie literarisch auf die von ihnen konstatierte Krise reagierten und einzuwirken versuchten“ (p. 10). His main point is that pagan authors perceived the changing world surrounding them as being in crisis, and that the threat they felt as a result of this incited them to discursively construct a distinct Hellenic identity in their texts.

Stenger's enterprise is a welcome addition to existing scholarship: it draws attention to a series of fascinating texts which are not often studied together, but which, as he convincingly shows, creatively reacted to, and sought to influence, changes that were taking place in the fourth century. In many cases, moreover, Stenger presents stimulating and innovative readings of these texts. Three chapters in particular merit to be mentioned here. Chapter Three studies reflections on emperors, traditionally characterized by specific voices such as the philosopher's, the panegyrist's, or the historian's, as well as by specific discursive forms, especially the panegyric speech. Against this background, Stenger provides a detailed analysis of texts by Themistius, Julian, and Libanius. Themistius, as Stenger

shows, presents a kingship ideal that is acceptable to both Christians and pagans: by talking about kingship in general rather than about particular emperors and by stressing its philosophical and cultural rather than its religious foundations, he allows adherents of all religions to read in his message what they wish to hear. In what is one of the best parts of his book, Stenger then shows how Julian not only presents a new voice on kingship (the emperor himself rather than, say, a panegyrist), but also uses original discursive forms such as myth and satire in order to question traditional panegyrics and present his own ideal of the philosopher-king instead. Libanius, finally, adapts to the new, Christian discourse and presents Julian as a *theios aner*, a pagan version of the Christian Priest-King.

Chapter Five, in turn, deals with the shaping of memory. Taking his cue from the fact that Christian and pagan authors give a radically different view of the circumstances surrounding Julian's death, Stenger analyses a number of texts as efforts to install the author's view of historical events at the expense of competing, mostly Christian views. The result is a stimulating analysis of especially Libanius' Orations 16, 18, 37, and 60, Eunapius' *Histories*, and Julian's *Misopogon*, sometimes in explicit contrast with Christian authors such as Gregory of Nazianzus or John Chrysostom. In addition, Chapter Five demonstrates how commonplaces and genres not only show an author's mastery of past literature, but also allow him to manipulate the image of the present and thereby influence the future: „Die schriftlich festgehaltene Erinnerung wird durch literarische Mittel und Erfindung verzerrt, bis sie mit dem Weltbild des Autors in Einklang steht. Solange sich diese Fiktionalisierung in den Bahnen dessen bewegte, was die Rezipienten erwarten konnten, also Konventionen folgte, konnten die Autoren damit rechnen, zumindest bei einem Großteil ihres Publikums auf Zustimmung zu stoßen.“ (p. 313)

The third chapter that merits special mention is Chapter Six, which shows how texts were used for promoting religious ideas. Salu(s)tius' *On the Gods and the World*, for example, offers its readers the hermeneutic keys to a Neoplatonic reading of myths.

Julian's hymns also discuss communication with the gods, but are less systematical and more practical: Julian gradually refines his image of the Mother of the Gods and Helios until, finally, he can address them in prayer. Other texts engage more directly in religious competition. Julian's *Against the Galilaeans* presents the image of a clash of cultures of unequal value. Themistius' *Fifth Oration*, on the other hand, favours tolerance and competition amongst the various religions of the Empire. Libanius' *Pro Templis*, finally, uses juridical and utilitarian arguments alongside tradition in order to defend 'paganism' as well as to attack Christianity.

Of the other two chapters, Chapter Two, although making some interesting points, unites some rather divergent material under the heading of a search for what Stenger sees, ultimately, as a homogeneous and stable (albeit discursively constructed) identity. Chapter Four examines the image of the intellectual, characterized by Stenger through education, competition with peers, and spiritual authority. Like Chapter Two, it does not have the same amount of in-depth engagement with texts that provides such stimulating reading in the book's other chapters and therefore ends up presenting a rather static and traditional image of the intellectual in Late antiquity. The exiting studies on the Second Sophistic by scholars such as Thomas Schmitz and Tim Whitmarsh, or on images of intellectuals in antiquity by R. R. R. Smith and Paul Zanker (none of which are mentioned in the bibliography, though Schmitz is referred to in a footnote) might have offered some pointers here. Likewise, the book as a whole would have benefitted from deeper engagement with recent studies on Late antiquity such as Isabella Sandwell's book on „Religious Identity in Late Antiquity“, mentioned in both footnotes and bibliography, but not, it seems, fully taken into account, or the studies on changing elites, for example by Peter Heather or in Arethusa 33.3 (2000) („Elites in Late Antiquity“), none of which are mentioned. Taken together, these studies question some of the premises upon which Stenger's book is built: whereas Stenger presents a rather monolithic image of the fourth century in terms of rhetorically constructed binary

oppositions (Christianity-paganism or Greek-Latin), different texts in fact make divergent use of these oppositions, and the context is not the same under Constantius as under Theodosius I. The way forward in the study of Hellenic identity as well as of the image of the intellectual in the fourth century, then, is by studying these individual variations rather than the general image. At his best, Stenger himself does exactly that: the most exciting pages in this long book are definitely the ones offering interpretations on texts discussing kingship, shaping memory, and promoting religious ideas. In addition, Stenger has done a great job in attracting attention to some often neglected authors.

HistLit 2010-2-158 / Lieve Van Hoof über Stenger, Jan: *Hellenische Identität in der Spätantike. Pagane Autoren und ihr Unbehagen an der eigenen Zeit*. Berlin u.a. 2009, in: H-Soz-Kult 31.05.2010.