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PREFERRED PANEL:

4. Continuity and Change in Late Antiquity

TITLE OF THE PAPER:

Approaching Constantinian Poetry. Reflections on a method.

LENGTH OF THE PAPER:

20 minutes

OUTLINE OF THE CONTENT:

In this paper I will consider different ways to approach the hard-to-handle fourth-century poetry of the Constantinian era. One of the central axes in my proposal is the tension between the cultural continuity provided by the educational system and the change in the people appropriating it. The poetry of our corpus will be studied as the product of a preceptive poetics, pushing textual production in certain directions. Looking at techniques taught by grammarians and rhetoricians and used by the poets will provide us with some basic stepping stones for further study of this poetry.

The flourishing of late antique studies has definitely proved fruitful and beneficiary for the study of late antique literature, attributing to it its fair place among Latin literature. However, the poetry dating back to the age of Constantine and his sons (featuring such authors as Juvencus, Lactantius, Optatianus and Avienus) provides one particular exception, remaining relatively unknown and un(der)studied.

Underlying this situation is what I would call the fragmentary nature of the surviving works: little poetry from this period is extant, little of it can be narrowed down in time, little is known about its authorship and if there is, even less is known about the authors themselves, etc. This sets it apart from the later poetry, which provides us with more solid ground on which to base research. Consider for example the sheer poverty of information concerning Juvencus or Avienus, as opposed to the wealth of data surrounding Ausonius or Ambrose and their milieus. Due to this holey nature of Constantinian poetry, research usually either limits itself to some general remarks or is absent. Thus the period directly preceding – and possibly enlightening – the apotheosis at the turn of the century remains relatively shrouded. Reflection on a feasible method is long due.