

CALVIN B. KENDAL – FAITH WALLIS, *Isidore of Seville: On the Nature of Things. Translated with introduction, notes and commentary.* Translated Texts for Historians, 66, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016, xiv+313 pp., £25.00 (pb), ISBN 978-1-78138-294-3.

There has been a revival of interest in recent years in Anglophone scholarship in Isidore of Seville. Much has been centred on his *Etymologies*, and so this volume making available for the first time another of Isidore's widely-read works to English readers without Latin is to be greatly welcomed. For those with Latin its introduction and notes still have much to offer. The book is divided into three sections: an introduction, the translation proper, and a chapter by chapter commentary to which are added five brief appendices. There is also a full bibliography and a useful table of sources and parallel passages.

The introduction is ninety pages long. Its first section (around 25 pages) places Isidore in his temporary and intellectual context and explores the purposes of the *DNR*. It identifies the work as being something of an outlier in Isidore's oeuvre, being neither a work of *grammatica* nor an aid for preaching or exegesis, but rather an hybrid of the two. The editors note the relative poverty of the information available to Isidore, but see the *DNR* as the product of a "intelligent, creative, and even audacious mind" (p.12). Here a little more on the internal inconsistencies of the *DNR* and the degree to which Isidore understood all that he had read would perhaps have been useful. This question is dealt with in the commentary on specific points, but a more extended general discussion would also have been welcome. Isidore, it is argued, intended that the *DNR* would contribute towards a "Christianised erudition" that would "guide curiosity concerning profane knowledge into the channels of *doctrina christiana*" (p.26). Isidore's approach to his subject is one of rational explanations which were intended to suppress apocalyptic or millennialist interpretations of natural phenomenon among the laity, and perhaps especially among the clergy, on the one hand, but also on the other to challenge a growing fundamentalist Christianity which rejected the learning of the past. Cosmas Indicopleustes's *Christian Topography* is singled out as an example of this trend which concerned Isidore. Perhaps a little more could have been said about Isidore's relationship with Lucretius and the *DNR*'s with the earlier poet's *De Rerum Natura*. Was Isidore concerned that the rational approach towards natural phenomena that he admired could, without due care, slip into atheism? Perhaps a little more could also have been said about Isidore's reluctance at times to pursue his rationalising agenda to its logical

conclusions. Notoriously chapter 27 of the *DNR* equivocates as to whether stars possess souls. As our editors note, here there would have been an ideal opportunity to crush some of the ideas advocated by Priscillianists, but it is one that Isidore does not take. Some further speculation on that reluctance would have been useful.

The remainder of the introduction is taken up with a discussion of the genesis of the work and its manuscript tradition. The first part is taken up with a discussion of the three recensions of the *DNR*. All are seen as products of seventh century Spain. This includes the so-called long recension and the “mystic addition” of chapter one. These are seen as early and composed in the Iberian peninsula in contrast with much scholarship which posits a later and perhaps Irish origin for this part of the work. The authors hint that from stylistic criteria the “middle recension” may have been composed under Isidore’s instruction rather than being a direct product of the bishop himself (p.42). A further section deals briefly with the relationship between the *DNR* and King Sisebut’s poem-epistle on eclipses and the diffusion of the two across Western Europe. The work is argued to come to England by way of Lombard Italy and to Gaul in the hands of monks fleeing from the Moorish invasion of the Iberian peninsula, in AD 711. There is then a long inventory of the manuscripts and editions of the text (33 pages).

The translation of the *DNR* itself takes up 77 pages. The translation is clear and crisp. Isidore’s quotations and close paraphrases from his sources are usefully printed in italics making them easy to identify and give the reader a good sense of the bishop’s relationship with, and deployment of, his source material. The text also reproduces where they are encountered in our manuscripts the six *rotae*, or circular diagrams, and the figure of the elements found in chapter 11. The internal labelling of the figures is translated for the reader in the figures themselves. The diagram of the phases of the moon in chapter eighteen and the T-O map found at the end of chapter 47/48 are also reproduced. Chapters are enumerated by the long recension, but the alternative numbering of the middle recension is also given to avoid confusion and the beginning and the end of the “mystic addition in chapter one are clearly marked.

The commentary of 76 pages is detailed and, where relevant, includes discussion of the diagrams in the text as well as the text itself. The reader is taken through the complexities of interpretation, such as those regarding the “elements” diagram of chapter 11 and Isidore’s views of the heavens in a careful and lucid fashion. There is a tendency for the authors to leave their reader in a state of *aporia* at times, but this is, perhaps, no bad thing.

The appendices reproduce Sisebut’s verse account of eclipses and briefly discuss its relationship with Isidore’s text and that between king and savant (which is seen as troubled).

Prior to the publication of this volume, Anglophone scholars naturally turned to Jacques Fontaine's *Traité de la nature, suivi de L'épître en vers du roi Sisebut à Isidore* (Boardeaux: Féret et fils, 1960, reprinted Turnhout:Brepols 2002 = Collection des Études Augustiniennes: Série Moyen Âge et Temps modernes (EAMA) 39). While this work in no way supersedes Fontaine, much has happened in 56 years. Kendall and Wallis engage in a lively fashion with Fontaine and present new theories and developments in an equally thorough and lucid way. As such this volume is now, and rightly, destined to be the first port of call for any Anglophone, and perhaps many non-Anglophone scholars in work on Isidore's fascinating text.

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