

Rossitza ATANASSOVA
Art and Idolatry in Prudentius

In this paper I present a reading of the *Contra Orationem Symmachi 1-2* as a set of political poems, reflecting the imperial position about the old forms of worship in the pagan-Christian conflict, and Prudentius' anxiety about the artistic value of the pagan monuments and works of art, by divorcing it from its pagan significance. Having accepted the historical relevance of these poems, I argue that Prudentius used the panegyric themes of Christian imperial legislation and military victories by Christ's will to express the anxiety of the Christian circles about the symbols of paganism.

For this purpose, the First Book highlights the laws of Theodosius (391 AD) and his dynasty (*CTh* 16, 10, 15 of 399 AD) that forbade pagan sacrifices but sanctified the preservation as State ornaments of pagan temples and works of religious art. Then, this official position is contrasted with the condemnation to destruction of the representation in statues of the pagan gods that, in the Second Book, introduces the debate about whether Victory should be worshipped at her Altar in the Senate house. As an explanation for the ambivalence of the Imperial policy against paganism, I introduce other anti-pagan laws, such as that of 399 *De idolis deponendis* (*CTh.* 16, 10, 18) and I use some relevant passages from St. Augustine's *Epistles* (29, 50, 91, 232) and *Sermon* 62 as the evidence for the role that the Church played in the pagan-Christian conflict. Next, I elucidate Prudentius' view on the subject of pagan art, by maintaining that the diatribe against the statue of Victory served the purpose of proclaiming Rome's Christian victories and, more specifically, the triumph over the Goths in 402. Finally, I will use as further evidence *Peristephanon* 10 to maintain that, by attacking the artificiality of the pagan religious beliefs and by ridiculing these forms of worship, the poet aims to distinguish between idolatry and art as such, and to free these from all the stains of pagan superstitions.