

Priscian's *Periegesis*: Sanitized Geography for Christian Students

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The *Periegesis* of Dionysius Periegetes, a geographical poem written in the time of Hadrian, enjoyed immense popularity as a teaching tool in late antiquity. Two Latin translations, one by the senator Rufius Festus Avienius (ca. 350) and one by the grammarian Priscian of Caesarea (ca. 500), testify to this poem's lasting appeal. Whereas Avienius interpreted Dionysius' text rather freely, Priscian's translation sticks as closely to the original as possible, which makes his occasional departures from the text all the more striking. The goal of this paper is to analyze the nature and motivations behind Priscian's emendations. Priscian, I suggest, reacted to pressures to Christianize the school curriculum by producing a de-paganized translation of the *Periegesis*. Yet, his translation also shows the limited power Christianity held over sixth-century education: while contemporary authors who did not write school texts, such as Cosmas Indicopleustes, could present a thoroughly Christianized picture of the world, Priscian was unable and unwilling to introduce Christian elements into his translation.

Priscian's emendations overwhelmingly concern the various pagan myths and depictions of pagan rites found in the *Periegesis*. Dionysius' didactic method consists of associating place-names with stories taken from Greek literature, both to make locales easier to remember and to help the student situate geographically the various tales learned in the grammarian's school (mostly tales from Homer and Apollonius Rhodius). While Priscian subscribes to the same didactic goals, he is careful to empty geographical myths of their pagan content. He achieves this both by dissociating geographical places from pagan gods (e.g. 526-8 where he drops references to Zeus in his description of Crete) and by focusing instead on human history (e.g. 707-8 where he adds a reference to Alexander the Great). Only a handful of pagan gods are mentioned in Priscian's translation, mainly as personifications.

Priscian's translation of the *Periegesis* should be read as a grammarian's response to the increasing push for a Christian curriculum in the sixth century. His translation effectively removes the most objectionable pagan elements of Dionysius' text, making it acceptable to a Christian readership. Yet, Priscian stops short of introducing Christian elements into the *Periegesis*. As a grammarian, Priscian was too committed to the traditional content of the school curriculum to consider supplementing it with Christian content. His careful de-paganized but not Christianized translation of the *Periegesis* illustrates the limits of Christianity's power over sixth-century schools.