

RESEARCH OUTPUTS / RÉSULTATS DE RECHERCHE

Review of S. RATTI, *Le premier saint Augustin (Paris, 2016)*

Pignot, Matthieu

Published in:
Bryn Mawr Classical Review

Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for pulished version (HARVARD):

Pignot, M 2018, 'Review of S. RATTI, *Le premier saint Augustin (Paris, 2016)*', *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, no. 2018.01.10. <<https://bmc.brynmawr.edu/2018/2018.01.10/>>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

BMCR

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

BMCR 2018.01.10

Le premier saint Augustin

Stéphane Ratti, *Le premier saint Augustin*. Paris: Les Belles lettres, 2016. 350. ISBN 9782251446103. €23.90 (pb).

Review by

Matthieu Pignot, Uniwersytet Warszawski. m.pignot@uw.edu.pl

Publisher's Preview

As stated in the prefatory note, Stéphane Ratti's book stems from the author's teaching at the Université pour Tous de Bourgogne (UTB). It focuses on the young Augustine, from his birth (354) to his election to episcopacy (395-396), aiming to shed light on Augustine's progressive renunciation of *paideia* and conversion to Christianity. In this respect, Ratti's study follows in the steps of previous scholarship, as constant attention has been devoted to the issue of Augustine's conversion. Since the nineteenth century at least, scholars have aimed at highlighting the nature of Augustine's conversion, as famously told in his *Confessiones*.¹ They have disagreed on whether a line should be drawn between the rhetorician and Neoplatonist Augustine and the Christian Augustine, and, if so, when this break should be situated in Augustine's life. Ratti's book follows a sceptical reading of Augustine's *Confessiones* and draws a sharp distinction between pagan learning and Christianity. The author's thesis is that Augustine's conversion, going together with his choice to abandon what the author calls "traditional pagan learning", should not be situated in Milan in 386 but rather in Africa, between his ordination to priesthood in 391, and 395-396. Rather than being a biography, this book provides a study of specific aspects of Augustine's early life that in the author's view demonstrate his thesis.

The book is divided into 20 chapters and an epilogue in three parts. They follow the chronology of Augustine's life, but focus on particular points of interest. The *Confessiones*, the main source for Augustine's early life, provide the framework for Ratti's chapters until Augustine's conversion. In these chapters, which also contain useful discussions about the broader historical context, the author emphasises the apparent contrast between the young Augustine, adhering to pagan learning and culture, and the critical recollections of this youth in the *Confessiones*.

The first two chapters discuss Punic, Greek and Roman heritage in Augustine's life, underlining his lack of knowledge of Punic and Greek, the significance of Latin and Roman culture and education in his life, and Augustine's ambiguous relationship to it. Chapter 3 and 4 deal with sex and intimacy in Augustine's early life as told in the second book of the *Confessiones*, the contrast between Augustine's rather open talk about sex and about his relationship with his own body, and the guilty retelling of it, in particular the episode of the theft of the pears, which Ratti peculiarly reads as a reference to sexual transgression. Chapter 5 explores Augustine's encounter with paganism in Carthage as described in the third book of the *Confessiones*, and reflects on the philosophical schools that he may have encountered and that may have influenced him, particularly Neoplatonism. Chapter 6 deals with pagan theatre, emphasising the young Augustine's enjoyment of it in Carthage, and the later critical views of the bishop. Chapter 7 discusses Augustine's faithful relationship with his unnamed concubine, and Augustine's later guilty recollections. Ratti suggests that despite her bearing him a son (Adeodatus), Augustine attempted to avoid procreation, and when she was eventually dismissed, this was decided by Monica. Chapters 8 and 9 argue that the young Augustine's ambition was to follow the example of pagan philosophers. Chapter 8 presents evidence about Hierus, the rhetorician, a major model for the young Augustine according to Ratti, while Chapter 9 argues that Augustine left Carthage for Rome because of his growing interest in pagan culture and his ambition to enter the circle of famous pagan intellectuals.

Chapter 10 provides a description of Rome in 384 as the pagan city *par excellence*, rejected by Augustine in his recollections, and Augustine's temporary adhesion to the Academics, which he encountered through the writings of Cicero. The author argues that Augustine's growing scepticism was part of a secular philosophical quest rather than a prelude to his conversion to Christianity. Chapter 11 describes Augustine's teaching in Rome and the figure of Symmachus, who, according to Ratti, chose and sent Augustine to Milan, because he would already have heard about Augustine in Carthage. Chapters 12 and 13 discuss Augustine's activities in Milan. Chapter 12 describes the troubled historical context of Augustine's arrival in the city, Augustine's relationship with Ambrose and his role as father of Augustine in

condemnation of it in the *Confessiones*. For Ratti, the meeting with Ambrose was not decisive for Augustine's conversion, although it was presented as such by Augustine. Augustine first met Ambrose to improve relations rather than out of Christian interest, while later Ambrose summoned Augustine to tell him about the wrongdoings of his mother Monica (who brought food and drink to the tombs of the martyrs). Chapter 13 focuses on events in 385-386: underlining Augustine's doubts and questioning, Ratti argues that these would demonstrate that Augustine was not a Christian in 385-386. Moreover, his plans to marry would have been suggested and imposed by Monica, while Augustine would have been sceptical about Ambrose's invention of Gervasius and Protasius.

Chapter 14 provides Ratti's interpretation of Augustine's conversion in the garden narrated in the eighth book of the *Confessiones*: the conversion was not sudden and complete in 386 but rather happened in 395. Augustine was not "fully" Christian between 386 and 395, as would be proven by his works written in Cassiciacum. The famous "Tolle! Lege!" heard by Augustine would recall the practice of randomly opening and reading the Bible (*sortes Biblicae*), and provide evidence of Augustine's promotion of this practice, against the pagan equivalent (*sortes Vergilianae*). Chapter 15 presents Augustine's stay in Cassiciacum as a period of study of liberal arts as a Neoplatonist and not as a Christian, thus opposing the two, while Chapter 16, focusing on Augustine's return to Thagaste (388-391), again argues that when he returned to Africa, Augustine was not fundamentally different: he did not abandon the traditional *paideia*, nor found a monastery in Thagaste, but rather continued his intellectual quest as a philosopher. Chapter 17, discussing Augustine's ordination to priesthood in 391, suggests that Augustine was disappointed because he hoped to be elected a bishop. Chapter 18 aims at shedding more light on Augustine by contrasting him with Jerome and discussing their famously polemical correspondence. Ratti argues that Augustine was jealous of Jerome's linguistic skills and that despite apparent reconciliation, their relationship never improved. Ratti reads Jerome's congratulations to Augustine about his fight against Pelagianism as ironical statements and argues that Augustine wrote the narrative of his conversion in the *Confessiones* with Jerome in mind, hoping to compete with Jerome's own narrative of conversion. Chapter 19 argues that Augustine progressively broke away from pagan culture only after ordination, as would be particularly shown in his letter of rebuke sent to his former disciple Licentius, presented by Ratti as a staunch pagan, who had written to him with questions about liberal arts and sent him a poem (Augustine, *Ep.* 26). Chapter 20 finally discusses Augustine's preaching activity as a bishop, mostly on the basis of the newly discovered Dolbeau sermons.

The epilogue of the book goes beyond the focus on the young Augustine to investigate Augustine's fight against what Ratti calls "cultural paganism", started after 391, through the example of his correspondence with the aristocrat Volusianus. Against a more straightforward reading, it offers a peculiar analysis of the correspondence, interpreting Volusianus' short letter, asking a series of questions about Christianity, as an open and thoughtful provocation against Augustine, that would make clever use of irony to attack the bishop (see Augustine, *Ep.* 135 written in 411-412). Ratti particularly investigates polemical uses of Virgil and references to Neoplatonist ideas as transmitted by Marius Victorinus in the correspondence. For Ratti, Volusianus was a pagan intellectual who specialised in the interpretation of Virgil and who challenged Augustine by bringing him back to his own past as a pagan intellectual.

Readers familiar with the modern biographies of Augustine will have noticed that while Ratti's book offers a summary of key episodes in Augustine's early life (with significant gaps: e. g. Manichaeism and Augustine's early works are seldom discussed), it also suggests specific interpretations. In particular, it broadly understands Augustine's conversion as an intellectual turn from pagan to Christian culture that would have taken place in Africa in the 390s. The assumption that, to become a Christian, Augustine had to abandon classical learning and Neoplatonism rests on a particularly narrow definition of Christian belonging.

In broader terms, despite this being minimised by Ratti, Augustine grew up in a Christian environment, he entered the catechumenate during childhood (*Conf.* 1.11.18), adhered to the Manichaeans who proclaimed to be the “true” followers of Christ, returned to the status of catechumen in Milan, and was taught about Christianity and baptised there. Ratti’s understanding of Augustine’s conversion is however based on a neat separation between classical learning and philosophy, which he calls “pagan”, and Christianity. This leads him to interpret the main episodes of Augustine’s life in terms of open conflict between paganism and Christianity. For Ratti, Augustine spent all his early life as a “pagan” because he was impregnated by classical culture, while he started to be Christian when he openly fought pagans and their culture as a cleric.² This view, as clearly shown in the book, relates to Ratti’s previous studies on the struggle between paganism and Christianity, in particular his work on the *Historia Augusta*, which is frequently quoted, to highlight potential parallels and influences between the *Historia* and the *Confessiones*. The interpretation of episodes of Augustine’s life and recollections as proof of conflict between pagans and Christians is often based on a narrow reading of the evidence (in particular the supposed polemical nature of the random reading in the garden scene, or Volusianus’ questions understood as open attacks).

More generally, although Ratti’s critical approach is certainly commendable, the reviewer found that the absence of any scholarly footnotes in the book, except for a few quotations from literary sources, prevents to a great extent any fruitful scholarly debate. While the book seems intended for a broad audience, the frequent allusions to previous scholarship would have required appropriate referencing, especially because Ratti often critically addresses the interpretations of other specialists, like Marrou, Brown and particularly Lancel, whom he calls “Christian readers” or “hagiographers” of Augustine.³ Ratti’s at times strongly polemical and allusive tone is at odds in a book aimed at a wide readership. The same applies to Ratti’s philological discussions, attempting to provide corrections to the text of Augustine’s works and lead to new interpretations (a striking example, at pp. 48-53, is Ratti’s reading of *Confessiones* II, 6 (“Quin immo ubi me ille pater in balneis vidit pubescentem et inquieta indutum adulescentia”: Augustine’s describes his father’s amazement in the baths at his now reached puberty), interpreted as evidence for the fact that Augustine had an erection and proposing, rather unconvincingly, to correct *indutum* with *induratum* (failing to acknowledge the antithesis with “putting on” Christ in the decisive text of *Romans* 13, 14).

Overall, while the book is generally written in a readable style and provides good overviews of aspects of Augustine’s life (for instance chapter 20 on Augustine’s preaching activity), Ratti does not give the adequate tools to the general reader to assess his interpretations against the wider scholarly discussion.

Editing is accurate (except for p. 26 “*Historia ecclesiastica tripertita*”; p. 204 “vont accéléré”; p. 327: “l’emploi du mot”), while there are a few factual errors or inaccurate statements (besides those already listed in Lagouanère’s review, for example, Augustine’s preserved sermons amount to over 800 rather than around 400 as claimed at p. 279; there is no evidence for Monica reading the Bible to Augustine as claimed at p. 285).

Notes

¹. For an overview of the debate: Madec, G., (1989), “Le néoplatonisme dans la conversion d’Augustin. État d’une question centenaire (depuis Harnack et Boissier, 1888)”, in Mayer, C., Chelius, K. H., (eds.), *Internationales Symposium über den Stand der Augustinus-Forschung* (Würzburg, 1989), 9-25.

². For a critical review of Ratti’s approach see Lagouanère’s review: [Revue Etudes Anciennes](#).

³. See pp. 22, 24, 46, 64, 104, 127, 175, 186, 217, 233.