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Frontinus and the Curae of the Curator Aquarum

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Abstract

Review of Michael Peachin, *Frontinus and the curae of the curator aquarum. Heidelberger althistorische Beiträge und epigraphische Studien, Bd. 39*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004. Pp. ix, 197. ISBN 3-515-08638-6.

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Michael Peachin, *Frontinus and the curae of the curator aquarum. Heidelberger althistorische Beiträge und epigraphische Studien, Bd. 39.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004. Pp. ix, 197. ISBN 3-515-08638-6. €39.00.

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Michael Peachin (hereafter P.) has produced an interesting book on Frontinus. Raised eyebrows, anyone? Read on.

P. argues that Frontinus' *commentarius* on Rome's water supply was neither a handbook nor an encomium but rather a rhetorically and politically sophisticated "call to join the spirit of the new age" (p. 140), or, less high-falutin', a "political pamphlet" (p. 7, 81) addressed to the city's elite property owners. The argument, methodical and full, is presented with an agreeable air of openness about textual difficulties whose resolution may be tendentious, arguments that may be circular, and questions that cannot be answered.¹ There is also a sprinkling of wit, including -- my favorite -- a reference to the aforesaid elite property owners "caught with their pipes illegally in the ducts" (p. 56).

The introduction critiques past attempts to make sense of this text (whose title, P. argues, with others, was *De aquis*) and announces the approach taken here, for which the work's concluding paragraph (*Aq.* 130), rather than its programmatic introduction (*Aq.* 1-3), is "the most telling segment of the entire tract" (p. 6). The essential datum of historical context, according to P., is Nerva's promise to continue his predecessors' *beneficia* unasked (quoted at Plin. *Ep.* 10.58.7-9). Private access to public water had been granted as an imperial *beneficium* since the principate of Augustus, but a parallel "authority" over taps in Rome's aqueducts had long been exercised by corrupt *aquarii*. Ensuring that elite urban and suburban properties remained well-watered while reasserting imperial control over water grants was, in P.'s view, Frontinus' administrative challenge as commissioner and his rhetorical challenge as author.

In chapter 2 P. argues for the uniqueness of *De aquis*. In effect, the chapter explores dead ends. Dead, but not devoid of interest. The discussion is rather narrowly focused on texts connected with administrative posts (Agrippa's *commentarii* on the water supply, daybooks of provincial governors, the *Gnomon* of the Idios Logos, and legal treatises on government posts), although there is a concluding nod in the direction of *commentarius* as apologetic history. It might also have been useful to follow up the indication at *Aq.* 77 that Frontinus had two types of reader in mind, those who will read every word of the "boring and complicated" details of water distribution, and those who just want the totals.

This is reminiscent of what Vitruvius indicates about the two audiences of his own detail-filled treatise, which he offers "not only to builders (*aedificantibus*) but also to all intellectuals (*sapientibus*)" (1.1.18). Whether a readership interested in the big picture, so to speak, of administration existed is a separate question, one that P. would, I think, answer in the negative (see pp. 8-10). But that is not to say that Frontinus, like Vitruvius, didn't hope to find, or create, one. His contemporary Statius apparently found, or created, a readership for detailed villa descriptions in verse that one might not, on the evidence of earlier occasional poetry, have expected to exist, exploiting a (relatively) safe vein of elite competition. Perhaps Frontinus hoped that with *De aquis* he might open another vein, this one in the more socially useful field of administrative endeavor.²

Chapter 3 contains the heart of the argument. In it P. keeps his mind's eye on "the icy visages of a group of irate senators" contemplating Nerva's water reforms (p. 42), and takes his starting point from the work's final paragraph, in which Frontinus addresses contemporaries affected by his administration, both those who have and those who have not obtained an official grant of tapping privileges: "the whole book might be perceived as a kind of public announcement of, and simultaneously a kind of apology for, the new policy with regard to the aqueducts and their waters" (p. 37).

Tracing "the theme of private persons and abuse of the aqueducts" (p. 61) through the various sections of Frontinus' treatise,³ P. shows the carrot that Frontinus held out in front of his legal stick.⁴ Thanks to Frontinus' administrative diligence, the emperor has more water -- nearly twice as much (*Aq.* 87) -- to give out as *beneficia* now that the unrecorded and illicit "grants" made by the *aquarii* have been exposed. The carrot does, in fact, reek of carrot. But P. doesn't really check it for blemishes. In arguing that "nothing will change" (p. 80) for those icy-visaged aristocrats, for example, he avoids the issue of cost. Even if the right to tap was a *beneficium*, the water so obtained might have had to be paid for via taxes (*Aq.* 118.1-3, cf. Vitruvius 8.6.2).⁵ So things might indeed be changing. Also problematic is the fact that so much of the text is beside the point for the rhetorical purpose identified by P. Frontinus' insistence on knowing everything there is to know about the bureau entrusted to him (*Aq.* 1) is treated by P. as the underpinning of Frontinus' message to his peers: his knowledge produced results (see, e.g., pp. 50-55, 64). But many of the work's recommendations and technical details are more easily explained as knowledge that Frontinus labored to gather and that will be of use to his successors: the necessity of knowing the likely costs and locations of repairs (*Aq.* 17), the dimensions and materials of pipes and spigots (*Aq.* 25-63), the instructions about pipe sizes to use in future (*Aq.* 37), the list of prior *curatores aquarum* (useful for ascertaining the legitimacy of exemptions: *Aq.* 129.10), the equipment of the *curator* (*Aq.* 100), the instructions on how to implement an imperial grant (*Aq.* 105) and curb abuses of the bureau's workforce (*Aq.* 117.4). Furthermore, Frontinus' discussion of Nerva's water reforms outside of the question of private access -- the distribution by areas has been improved, so that areas are now covered by more than one aqueduct, and basins have two taps in case of diversions in one line (*Aq.* 87.3-5; cf. 88.1, 88.4, 89-93 for other reforms) -- is testimony to a major imperial effort, which makes one wonder why, if P. is right about the purpose of *De aquis*, "the essential point of the book [seems] too sensitive to be mentioned too openly" (p. 80).⁶

Ultimately, P. has larger fish to fry: not Frontinus but the administrative system (to look on the bright side) created by the class of which he was, as this book argues, a representative member. The rethinking of Frontinus and the rereading of *De aquis* as a source for elite attitudes to administration occupy chapter 4. P. argues that evidence about

Frontinus in sources other than *De aquis* is generally read through the lens of *De aquis*; take this away and his features become "blurred" (p. 96). *Faute de mieux*, it seems, Frontinus ends up with something of a likeness to the younger Pliny (p. 97). This doesn't move us forrader by much. The second, and richer, part of the chapter looks at what *De aquis* tells us about the administration of water supply from the republican period through the first century CE, paying particular attention to evidence of record-keeping and oversight. In both fields P. finds a legacy of adhocery, or even downright negligence. The resulting mess threatens "the heart of the early Empire's political system" (p. 122), namely, the imperial *beneficia* that tied the elite to their *princeps*. It was essential to clarify the lines of gift-exchange, particularly at the outset of what Nerva (presumably) hoped was a new dynasty. This, P. argues, was what Frontinus set out to do as *curator aquarum*, and it was also the lesson he wanted to pass on to his successors through his *commentarius* (pp. 141-42).⁷

I suggested above that Frontinus' work may address two types of reader. I can say the same with more confidence about P.'s: this is a book worth the attention of both specialists who need to know their Frontinus and all of us who want to know, to borrow a section title from chapter 4, "For Whom the Water Flows."⁸

Notes:

^{1.} Latin text and English translation are those of R. H. Rodgers (*Frontinus, De aquaeductu urbis Romae*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; translation available online at [On the Water-Management of the City of Rome](#); P.'s occasional departures are discussed in the notes.

^{2.} Agrippa's *aedilitatis suae commemoratio*, with its fanfare about public celebrations at the opening of the new and improved water supply (see Plin. *Nat.* 36.121), was perhaps a forerunner.

^{3.} The relevant passages are gathered in Appendix 7. Other appendices provide: (1) a timeline for Frontinus, (2) an outline of *Aq.*, (3) an overview of regulations mentioned in *Aq.*, (4) a brief discussion of stylistic embellishments in *Aq.*, (5) a discussion of a possible echo of *Aq.* at Martial 12.8.1-2, (6) a list of references in *Aq.* to *commentarii*, and (8) passages of *Aq.* relevant to supplying water for the general public.

^{4.} Cf. p. 121: "The carrot, if it is to attract, must somehow be made to reek of carrot." The "stick" is delation. P. even suggests that Frontinus characterizes his role as that of a *delator* (pp. 44, 48, 50, 55, 80), albeit a more acceptable *delator* than one of the "lowly denizens of an administrative bureau" (p. 55) who might also be able to offer the emperor information.

^{5.} The taxation issue is not clear-cut -- in a long note on *Aq.* 105.1 Rodgers rehearses the arguments for and against idea of a tax on water -- but there is no doubt that beneficiaries had to pay for tapping, for pipes, and for the construction a private *castellum* when things were done properly. *Aquarii*, among them the parodically titled "procurator of punctures" (*a punctis*: *Aq.* 115.3), were probably not particular about the delivery systems for the water they were stealing.

^{6.} Compare, for instance, Grimal's characterization of Frontinus as "porte-paroles du Prince," quoted with approval by P. (p. 141).

^{7.} It seems doubtful that he succeeded in the latter aim; as P. notes (p. 52, n. 40), there are no known (senatorial) *curatores aquarum* after Frontinus, while equestrian *procuratores* are attested in Trajan's principate and later.

[8.](#) Typos (none substantive): 7 (lession), 18 and 109 n. 75 (read *massam*, not *massa*), 35 and 38 (for *praestit<er>it* in 130.4 Rodgers reads *praestet*), 38 n. 6 (Frontinus.), 49 (incumbent), 56 n. 51 (Claudain), 57 (read thirty-seven, not twenty-five), 74 (maters), 99 (responsibilities), 100 (empassioned), 103 n. 52 (acrhivio), 112 n. 86 (stampet), 117 (reigning), 118 n. 105 (read Rodgers' not Rodgers), 127 n. 124 (suply), 130 n. 131 (entirity), 132 n. 137 (*coles*), 142 (lakadaisical), 146 (di-rectly), 151 n. 3 (read p. 506 for p. 106), 155 n. 1 (shcrieb), 160 (text for n. 3 is absent), 168, quotation of 109.6 (*pricipis*), 173 (weigned, Talyor's).

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