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Virtue Language in the Poetry of Prudentius

Relying on numismatic evidence, scholars have concluded that virtue language and imagery from the Late Republic to the Christian era evolve from a cooperative and communal meaning to virtues as attributes of individual emperors who employ them as political propaganda. Virtues did have a state cult, including *Concordia*, *Spes*, *Pudicitia* and *Pietas*. These personifications of divine virtues correspond to various aspects of imperial power and the benefits of the Roman Empire as instantiated by the emperor himself. The Christian emperors appropriated this instrument of imperial theology and emphasized the mystical and the divine rather than a rational and abstract approach to the virtues. While some Christian writers criticized pagans for the proliferation of virtues as divinities (e.g. Arnobius), others such as the late fourth century poet Prudentius exhibit a more sophisticated approach to the traditions of virtue language, which I argue he inherited and employed in his poetry.

My paper seeks to establish two sources of virtue language in several works of Prudentius. First, from the evidence of coins, the tradition of Emperor virtues provides a foundation to understand aspects of Prudentius' imperial theology in which ethical abstractions take on divine qualities essential for the success of the empire. The second source of Prudentius' virtue language, I argue, is pagan philosophical discourse. As in the case of Roman imperial virtues, the poet links philosophical discourse, for example, the *Psychomachia's Sapientia* and *Ratio*, with Christian virtues. Prudentius' poetry displays the Christian imperial stance of late fourth century Rome. The poet blends the tradition of Roman imperial virtues—as seen in imperial coinage—and the Platonist legacy of rationality and wisdom with Christian virtue language. The soul is therefore redefined as a repository of virtues that overcome vices through reason (and Christian faith); politically, the success and prestige of the Roman Empire becomes part of the new Christian dispensation. Individual, citizen and state are transformed through the interaction of virtues conceived in distinctively Roman, Platonist, and biblical ways.