The Eye of the Late Antique World:

The Power of Spiritual Sight in the *Carmina* of Paulinus of Nola

Throughout the Roman ancient world, the eye and, conversely, sight had a powerful presence. For example, Ovid writes in his *Amores II.5.44-48:* She was sorrowful in her face—she was sorrowful becomingly./ Just as hair was to be rent, even though it was adorned/ and an attack was to fly on tender cheeks/ as I saw her face, by accident arms fell;/ our girl is defended by her own weapons. Ovid describes in this section of his poem how the sight of a beloved can render a man consumed by rage into motionlessness. Beauty has become a weapon that a woman can wield with rather great success, and yet it’s effectiveness is entirely dependent upon the eye’s ability to perceive it. Sight then is an invaluable device, even when it is constructed in an imagined setting, so that for Ovid and his first century readers, the eye is the medium through which one can ensnare a lover and effect drastic and almost instantaneous shift in behavior.This concept of vision as powerful could and did translate rather well into the Late Antique period. By the mid-fifth century, with the rise and establishment of Christianity, the eye, though still a vehicle for perceiving beauty, becomes a conduit for the illumination of the soul. It was through the eyes that a pilgrim could perceive the sacred places and relics during pilgrimage, and it was the eyes, which were specially suited for understanding the iconography and symbolism of churches. Most importantly, the eyes become the means for expressing the perception of the holy, so that the faithful see the holy relics and places through the eye of faith or spiritual sight. Paulinus of Nola (353—431 C.E.) is one among many others of Late Antiquity who consider the eye crucial to theological and spiritual development. In his *Carmina,* in particular *Carmen 27* and *28*, Paulinus writes with this conception of the eye, but with a twist, so that words themselves have the ability to transform into embodiments of buildings and iconography. Though the concept itself is not abnormal to the Late Antique world, Paulinus uses it to create something highly exceptional: a transportable pilgrimage experience, which focuses on the rejuvenating properties of the relics of Saint Felix. Starting with a brief survey of Late Antique thought on the power of the eye and the interchangeability of text and image with regard to Christian thought, this paper will explore how Paulinus participates in the dialogue on sight, and then employs these concepts in his *Carmen 27* and *28* to create an accessible and portable pilgrimage experience to the complex of Saint Felix which is dependent upon spiritual sight.

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