

Pretium Operae:
Intertexts in Pomponius Mela's statement of purpose

A little studied and less understood author, Pomponius Mela was a Spanish intellectual active in Rome under Claudius. His short three-book *Chorography* is the first “geography” that survives intact in Latin which systematically provides a narrative map of the Mediterranean world as known in the first century ce. Working within the Greek tradition of scientific geography and ethnography that began with Anaximander of Miletus and Hekataios of Abdera (both whose works survive only in scant fragments), Mela was writing himself into that intellectual convention, while also establishing himself as an independent curator of Hispano-Roman chorographic information. Mela's literary tone vacillates between rhetorical and technical. He clearly had in mind Julius Caesar's *de Bello Gallico* in his ethnographies of the Nomads of northern Africa (1.41-48) and the Germans (3.26-28), his account of the Druids (3.18-19), and his description of Spain (2.87). But his style is moreover evocative of the spare, impersonal, and passive language employed by Roman land surveyors (*agrimensores*: c.f., Dilke 1971; Campbell 2000), owing, presumably, to the fact that Mela's work is largely a curation of data: the names of peoples and locales (*gentium locorumque nominibus*) and their “fairly-folded-up order” (*et eorum perplexo satis ordine*).

In his statement of purpose (1.1-2), Mela disavows eloquence (*impeditum opus et facundiae minime capax...si non ope ingenii orantis*), a common rhetorical trope intended to secure the goodwill of the reader/auditor (e.g., Hyperides, *Funeral Oration* praef2: διὸ καὶ μάλιστα [νῦν φοβοῦ]μαι, μή μοι συμ[βῆ] τὸν λόγον ἐλάττω φαίνεσθαι τῶν ἔργων τῶν γεγενη[μέ]νων). Mela also emphasizes the difficulty of his topic (*impeditum opus*) and its utility (*pretium operae*), as if apologizing for tackling a subject that leaves no space for rhetorical

flourishes. Mela, of course, has robust literary aspirations, manifested in the complexity of his preface, the embellishing digressions sprinkled throughout the treatise, and the rhetorical flourishes adorning his lists of toponyms (occasionally eliciting epic catalogues, especially the catalogue of ships [*Iliad* 2.494-759]) thus drawing attention away from the “dryness” of chorography and to his merits as an author who successfully presents chorography with artistry (see Janson 1964: 99; see also Parroni 1984: 23-29; Silbermann 1988).

Here we shall examine the mock modesty of Mela’s preface for intertexts with Livy (*ab Urbe Condita praef: operae pretium*), Vitruvius (1.1.17), Manilius, Pliny the Elder, and others, in order to explore how Mela writes himself into an intellectual tradition of semi-technical Roman literature. With a sometimes playful touch, Mela draws his reader into an intricate labyrinthine treatment of the Roman world that evinces complex interstices with recent and contemporary Roman literature.

Works Cited

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