

ANCIENT DESCRIPTIONS OF PAIN

CLARKE (J.R.), KING (D.), BALTUSSEN (H.) (edd.) *Pain Narratives in Greco-Roman Writings. Studies in the Representation of Physical and Mental Suffering*. (Studies in Ancient Medicine 58.) Pp. xiv + 312, colour ill. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023. Cased, €118. ISBN: 978-90-04-54948-7.

doi:10.1017/S0009840X24000258

Over the past years scholarly interest in emotions in antiquity has increased, examining how emotions influenced life's vicissitudes. Among the studies dedicated to this topic is the volume under review; a collection of essays dedicated to pain, which is defined as 'a quintessential aspect of human life' (p. 1). Recognising the importance of this emotion, the contributions intend to offer new insights into pain experiences in the ancient world. As the three editors explain in the introduction, the volume combines three elements: the subjective perspective of the patient; the expression of an emotional experience through language, narrative and representation; and the originality of the book in considering multiple contexts, cultures and genres for the first time. With a focus on pain as an experience, this emotion is not examined theoretically, but from the subjective angle. The contributions are not divided into separate parts but the editors, in their introduction, group the chapters into three sections, each devoted to a particular theme (p. 7).

The first group (Chapters 2–3) includes papers about the representation of pain from early Greek thought to Nicander's *Alexipharmaka*. In this analysis the vocabulary of pain has a certain importance, but also the language: indeed, these two elements allow us to understand the conceptualisation of pain. Considering terms such as ἄλγος, πόνος and ὀδύνη, Baltussen tries to show the boundary between physiology and psychology: it is almost absent in the Homeric poems and in the early Greek philosophers, starts to become more evident in Plato and is developed by Aristotle. What emerges is a growing awareness of moral attitudes, defining the evolution of the description of pain from a pre-scientific to a theorised way. Physical and psychological suffering is also examined by King in Chapter 3, in particular the connection between poison and pain in Nicander's *Alexipharmaka*. This didactic poem has a richness of vocabulary based, on the one hand, on medical language and, on the other, on the mythological background. What is noteworthy is the focus on the psychological experience: it is conceptualised through allusion, intertextuality, metaphors and similes, and it also gives a sense of fragmentation and de-socialisation of the victim.

The second group of papers (Chapters 4–9) concerns literary texts from the classical and the Roman periods that have not previously been studied from an emotional perspective. Therefore, this section is an important contribution to understanding the texts analysed in a psychological way, and not only from a literary or historical standpoint. The complex phenomenon of pain is discussed from several points of view, focusing on its nature, subjectivity and common opinions about it. The paper by S. Lawrence on Seneca's *Controversiae* 10.4 and 2.5 identifies the rhetorical tools used to create empathy in the audiences. These two texts describe different cases of infliction of physical pain on individuals, but both involve techniques that make the depiction of pain subjective: the aim is to impact the audience, who imagines what could happen to them, and not to other people. If here physical pain is described from a rhetorical perspective, the philosophical perspective is considered in the contributions by J.-C. Courtil and W. Cheng. In Chapter 5 Courtil examines the polysemy of *dolor* and *natura* starting from the double characterisation of

pain as a natural and unnatural phenomenon in Seneca the Younger. In Chapter 8 Cheng focuses on the conceptualisation of pain in Alexander of Aphrodisias, based on Aristotle's opposition of pain and pleasure, and being more sensitive to the varieties of pain. G. Petridou and Clarke's papers are dedicated to specific kinds of pain. In Chapter 6 Petridou explores the ancient and the modern cultural framing of gout, referring to Lucian's paratragedy *Podagra* and to the ancient idea of gout's incurability. In Chapter 9 Clarke is concerned with the concept of trauma, in both pagan and Christian evidence, with a comparison between the descriptions of Ovid's Marsyas and Prudentius' Vincent of Saragossa. Finally, as in the first section, vocabulary is also considered. In this regard, O. Lewis focuses on Archigenes of Apamea's classification of pain, examining his terminology and trying to revalue his method. The fragments transmitted by Galen are taken into account, especially those that refer to Archigenes' description of pain in inner parts: this evidence reveals a huge vocabulary, which qualifies the concept of pain, its sensations and physical changes, but also represents patients' pain narratives. As is clear, this second section is the heart of the volume; it examines pain narratives in literary texts, considering several ancient genres and periods: the parallels between different characterisations of pain as well as different cultural contexts provide an overview of pain narratives in antiquity, revaluing lesser-known texts and interpreting them from a psychological perspective.

The last group of papers (Chapters 10–12) is dedicated to Christian literature, although in Chapter 9 there is an anticipation of the themes discussed here. The first contribution, by F. McMeekin, provides an alternative reading of Ignatius of Antioch's *Romans* 4–5: depicting himself as a μαθητής ('disciple', in Christian contexts) and a combatant, the author uses didactic vocabulary to emphasise the concept of endurance, especially in relation to torture, which he has chosen deliberately. If here the topic is martyrdom, in the following paper G. Clark discusses Augustine's idea that pain is decreed by God, but there is a difference between good and bad people: the first accept pain as spiritual training, whereas the second should consider it as a punishment. Finally, J. Zecher examines some passion-lists, which were popular in ancient doxography and had a didactic usage: retracing examples such as the one found in Ps.-Andronicus' *De passionibus*, several definitions of pain results, both in a pagan and Christian context, and providing pain narratives. Although this last section concerns Christian literature, it comprises several parallels with Greek and Latin sources, so that the result is a continuation of ancient literature, which also considers the historical changes of the period.

The volume is one of the remarkable works of the last few years dedicated to emotions, showing scholars' interest in this topic and its many research perspectives. Unlike other books, which tend to explore emotions in a general sense, the volume under review focuses on the ancient perception of pain and especially the narratives around this feeling. The papers cover several genres and periods of the ancient world, highlighting the representation of pain and, first of all, the subjective perception. In many cases the analysis involves lexicon and vocabulary, which emphasises how an individual's perception of pain can be illustrated, with every word being consciously chosen. The subjective perception of pain, whether physical or mental, is something that connects the essays of the book, most of which are interconnected. Moreover, the connection between different aspects of ancient culture also emerges: for example, Christian writers adapted pagan vocabulary to new Christian conceptions, and this denotes a new perception of pain during the Christian era. The volume is highly recommended, especially to those who wish to deepen the study of ancient emotions, but also to those interested in ancient narratives.

Università della Basilicata

GIULIA FRENI
giulia.freni@unibas.it