

BOOK REVIEW

Mutations of Hellenism in Late Antiquity. By POLYMNIA ATHANASSIADI. Dorchester, U.K.: Ashgate Variorum, 2015. Pp. xviii + 374. Hardcover, \$170.00. ISBN 978-1-472443-66-3.

Polymnia Athanassiadi is one of the most sensitive and lucid expounders of pagan religious thought of Late Antiquity. The essays collected in this volume exhibit Athanassiadi's sustained attempt (from the 1970's to 2015) to shed light on what was once designated the religious "underworld" of later Platonism.

A first panoramic sketch of the historiography of Late Antiquity heralds Andrea Giardina's oft-cited critique of Peter Brown and company as unduly reflecting postmodern, Anglocentric perceptions and values.¹ Athanassiadi admits, however, that she too cannot escape making Late Antiquity in her own image. Brown's optimism is replaced by Athanassiadi's pessimism: Late Antiquity is defined by a shift away from humanism to theocentrism, intolerant orthodoxy, and violence. In a "capitulation of the will" of a "silenced humanity" (I.18), Christians and pagans adopted the straightjacket of a canon (I.21). As several later essays will argue, it is here that Iamblichus proves pivotal, since he "canonized" the *Chaldean Oracles* for later Platonism (essays VI, VII, X, and XIII).

A pagan holy man deserving of "empathy... and not pedantry" (II.250), Iamblichus was an exquisite exemplar of the processes of Hellenism that created a theological koine (III) and led to pagan monotheism's engulfing of the many by the one (IV). Hellenism thus became "purely religious" and received under Iamblichus' guidance its own "Bible", the *Chaldean Oracles* (III.197). The authoritative status of the *Oracles* plays a key role in several other essays, since its "codification" occurred in the second century along with the New Testament and the Mishnah (V.118; VI.129). Composed, according to Athanassiadi's reconstruction, within the priestly milieu of the temple of Bel and the community of philosophers (in particular, Numenius) at Apamea, the *Oracles* instantly became canon and excluded rival sources of revealed authority (V.134; XIII.152).

¹ Andrea Giardina, "Esplosione di tardoantico," *Studi Storici* 40 (1999): 157-180

In addition to glossing over the centuries of silence that has made many mistrust our belated sources (a scholarly suspicion that Athanassiadi rejects out of hand as “doubt for doubt’s sake,” XIII.150), her focus on the temple of Bel rests on a shaky interpretation of the inscription of Vaison-la-Romaine containing the words translated as, “in remembrance of the oracles (*tōn... logion*) to be found at Apamea” (V.131; cf. XIII.155). Yet, as Kent Rigsby has cogently argued, the phrase is better rendered “in remembrance of the learned men in Apamea” (understanding the genitive plural as deriving not from *logia* but *logioi*; *ZPE* 2007). In any case, while the *Oracles* were “born as a canon” (V.134), somewhat untidily she claims that their canonization was performed over a century later by Iamblichus who also canonized the Platonic dialogues in his curriculum (VI.136–137), thus starting a process that ended in “intellectual terrorism” among “people of the [Neoplatonic] Book” (VI.138; cf. XVIII.11) by the fifth century. The *Oracles* had become the “holy book of Hellenism” (VII.276) and *Hellēnismos* became the label of theological orthodoxy (VII.278). There is little pause in this reconstruction over the fact that no pagan appears to have adopted *Hellēnismos* for their religion or that the label *Hellēnes* continued to signify broader cultural and racial identities throughout Late Antiquity (the only exception would seem to be Julian, *Ep.* 84 Bidez-Cumont [= Sozomen, *HE* 5.16], but this is arguably a forgery; see my “Hellenism and its Discontents,” in the *Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, 2012).

Antiquity also saw a shift in religious authority from holy places to holy people (X–XII and XV–XVI). Oracles began to be displaced by human mediums in freelance divination sessions. The *Chaldean Oracles* are a quintessential instance: if we can trust the belated testimonia, their origins lay in a series of mediumistic experiences requiring immediate commentary. Sensitivity to the divergent aims of later commentators (especially Proclus and Damascius, but also Psellos and Plethon) is necessary for an appreciation of the ritual and metaphysical depth of the *Oracles*, as well as their religious impact as sacred texts (XIII, XIV, and XVII).

Pagan holy men combined personal divinity with concrete moral education of their fellow humans (XV, XVI), but were faced with conflict from within and without. Neoplatonic orthodoxy could besmear its own adherents as philosophically inadequate and, in turn, be faced with pressure and outright violence by Christians (XVIII and XIX). The otherwise bleak picture of “intellectual terror” and forced conversions should, however, be tempered somewhat by recalling conversions prompted by a deep attraction to a way of life and a particular teach-

er (XX). Ironically, the sole teacher noted for resisting the narrowing bureaucratization of education and for exploring all wisdom within intimate pedagogical relationships was the Christian Origen (XXI.14).

Athanassiadi's historiographical pessimism often occludes much that is worthy of note, from the unexpected interpretive openness of many commentators both pagan and Christian (even in the unlikely Augustine, as Gillian Clark has recently shown) to the persistence of dialogue amid the often-caricatured stodginess of Byzantine orthodoxy (as Averil Cameron has begun to explore).² Monolithic notions of "orthodoxy" by modern scholars must not prevent us from recognizing the stunning diversity and complex negotiations between often very different sorts of individuals and social contexts (Synesius makes only a single appearance, and Porphyry of Tyre arguably deserves to complicate the narrative on many fronts). Equally inhibiting is the sweeping conceptual ambiguity of cultural "osmosis" or of the label "Hellenism" in terms that are too broad to be of much help in detecting the precise dynamics of cultural identities in Late Antiquity. Nonetheless, Athanassiadi remains a significant and engaging interlocutor in the conversations on Late Antiquity and its pagan holy men.

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² Gillian Clark, "Can We Talk? Augustine and the possibility of dialogue," in S. Goldhill, ed., *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2008), 117-134; and "The And of God: Augustine, scripture and the curriculum," in D. Brakke, et al, *Shifting Cultural Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (Burlington, 2012), 151-163. Averil Cameron, *Dialoguing in Late Antiquity* (Washington DC, 2014).