

BOOK REVIEW

New Perspectives on Late Antiquity. Edited by DAVID HERNÁNDEZ DE LA FUENTE. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. Pp. vii + 524. Hardcover, \$92.99. ISBN 978-1-44382-718-8..

This rich volume originates from an International Symposium held in Segovia in 2009, where scholars from different fields were brought together to provide a transversal and up-to-date picture of Late Antiquity considered, as stated in the *Preface*, “the first Renaissance of the classical world” (1).

In his Keynote paper, Peter Brown sketches the history of a research field that he largely contributed to establish. It was Henri-Irénée Marrou, Santo Mazzarino, and Arnaldo Momigliano who showed to an entire generation of post-post-war graduates that “there was light after the third century” (8); since then, Late Antique studies (and Brown’s own scholarly production) largely changed our picture of the cultural dynamics of this age, also the pivotal theme of the nine Overview papers and sixteen Case Studies collected in this book.

Pedro Barceló examines the decentralization of Western imperial leadership from the third c. AD: delegation of judicial powers and military functions, as well as the end of imperial cults, caused a “power segmentation” that led to a progressive dismantlement of the emperor’s role. More complex than it may seem is the last phenomenon: if synods surely conquered an autonomous theological-juridical space, emperors like Constantius II did not renounce to active (albeit untraditional) interventions in religious politics.

Jaime Alvar analyses the interplays between Christianity and Oriental cults, both flourished in a moment when “individual interests and concerns” demanded “solutions to be provided in a similar way” (43). A peculiar religious commensality characterized the Empire (even if regional differences do existed), where different forms of interconnection were at stage; this also better explains the so-called *Christianisierung* of pagan cal-

endar, cultural vocabulary, and iconography. Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui's study also contributes to deconstruct an updated hermeneutic category like the couple assimilation/conflict, suggesting to adopt less apologetic labels like "continuity" and "rupture" (391).

The old paradigm of "decline" appears in Rosa Sanz Serrano's paper, dedicated to Hellenistic παιδεία between fourth and fifth c. AD. The author is right in considering education a crucial tension field, but seems to underestimate fourth-century attempts to shape a pedagogic and identity-making Christian humanism (paradigmatic is Basil's *Oratio ad iuuenes*). Such strategies, however ideologically connoted, of Christian re-functionalisation of traditional παιδεία, as well as figures like Plutarch of Athens and Syrianus, could have contributed to draw a more nuanced panorama.

Eastern goods like amphorae, wares, and marbles prove that (against traditional assumptions) transnational commerce between *Hispania* and the rest of the Mediterranean was still active until late seventh c. AD. Taking in consideration not only archaeological evidences, but also economical, social, and urban history, Enrique García Vargas draws a new, chronologically detailed picture of the Oriental presence in Late Antique Spain and of the peninsula's international role until the Umayyad conquest.

Francisco L. Lisi provides a survey on continuities and innovations between Neo-Platonism and Plato's inheritance, stressing the growing role played by mystical and hieratical elements. This synthesis can be integrated by Francesco Fronterotta's excellent study, which underlines the importance of Plotin's rethinking of the *Timaeus* in order to understand the differences between Plotin's monistic derivationism and Plato's dualistic productivism.

After having reassumed the debate concerning dating, authorship, and purposes of the *Peruigilium Veneris*, Carmen Codoñer provides a new analysis of this enigmatic poem. Particularly interesting is her interpretation of the much-debated last strophe as an image of the fragility of spring (and life), but also of the endless possibilities of new springtimes to come.

Given the centrality of ἔκφρασις in Late Antique poetry, both because of its correspondence to a mosaic-like aesthetics¹ and its openness to alle-

¹I refer to M. Roberts, *The Jeweled Style*, Ithaca-London 1989, surprisingly absent from Gigli's references.

gorical interpretation, Daria Gigli analyses John of Gaza's poem *Tabula mundi*, dedicated to the decoration of a Gaza bathhouse. Decisive are John's Neo-Platonic allegoricism and his Christianization of pictorial and even architectural elements, such as the cross at the centre of the bath's vault.

David Hernández de la Fuente reconsiders Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* in light of the Neo-Platonic principles of transition from One to the Multiplicity and of Circular motion. His point is convincing, but the author appears perhaps too assertive in concluding that "Nonnus' poetry contains a practical application of the aesthetic principles of Neo-Platonic allegory sketched in the works of philosophers such as Plotinus and Porphyry" (325). *Dionysiaca* (and the *Paraphrase*) seem in fact to exceed this formula: Rosa García-Gasco's study, dedicated to crisscrossed influences between Dionysism, Orphism, and Eleusinism in the poem, can confirm the multiplicity of Nonnus' cultural and ideological references.

Paula Olmos reflects on the role of Rhetoric in *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*. Especially in *Book V* Martianus Capella—probably a retired lawyer—shows his good acquaintance with the discipline, revealing for Olmos that he had less interest in promoting a specifically Neo-Platonic synthesis than in providing a more traditional (however extraordinarily multi-faceted) renovation of Latin encyclopaedic tradition.

Case studies are dedicated to very different topics, such as new findings from the *Vascones* area (Javier Andreu, María J. Peréx, Juan José Bienes), the role of *Antigermanismus* in the repression of Gainas' revolt (Eike Faber),² hints of economic vitality in Late Antique *Lusitania* (Marta González Herrero),³ religious and political symbolism in fourth-century coinage (Cláudio U. Carlan), propagandistic reuses of the Punic wars in Sidonius Apollinaris (David Álvarez Jiménez), space organization in the *Diocesis Hispaniarum* (Saúl Martín González), rural and urban landscape

² Faber seems sure that Fravitta was executed in 402 AD, despite convincing arguments by A. Cameron - J. Long, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius*, Berkeley 1993, 236–252 to postpone his death to 405 AD: this lower dating would not be without consequences for the theme discussed.

³ At 139, the text of Prud. *perist.* III, 186–190—which is of course not epigraphic—is in two points incorrect, and the translation is misleading: the poet refers to Eulalia's tomb in Mérida, not to any "Emerita hill".

in Western *Baetica* (Francisco José García Fernández, Jerónimo Sánchez Velasco), recent excavations in Castro of El Castellón (Jose Carlos Sastre Blanco, Patricia Fuentes Melgar), Polemius Silvius' *Laterculus* (David Paniagua), ecdotic problems in Emporium, *RhLM* 561–574 (Luigi Pirovano), φαντασία in Greek Patristic literature (Aglæ Pizzone), and traces of Aesopian tradition in Rabbinic literature (Lorena Miralles). Articles are followed by a rich overall bibliography; abstracts are unfortunately missing.

Rural areas and cities, peripheral *grammatici* and Neo-Platonic philosophers are the protagonists of the book, which shows the exuberant vitality of contemporary Late Antique studies. Despite recent progresses, also registered in this volume, much work remains to be done, and many cultural phenomena still wait for “a radical change of perspective” (so Paniagua on *Laterculus*) in order to be properly understood. To quote again Peter Brown, these are—and will be—exciting times.

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