

## BOOK REVIEWS

PETER GARNSEY AND CAROLINE HUMFRESS, *The Evolution of the Late Antique World*. Cambridge: Orchard Academic, 2001. Pp. 253. \$40.00/\$25.00.

Reviewed by David A. Michelson, Princeton University

"Late antiquity", a recent epithet for the age falling loosely between the peaks of Classical and Medieval civilization, has become an increasingly rich field as contemporary historians have sought to understand this period of European and Mediterranean history as more than just a foil to its better known chronological neighbors. Nevertheless, the long shadow of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* still hangs over some interpretations of late antique history. In their recent collaborative effort, Peter Garnsey (Cambridge University) and Caroline Humfress (University of California, Berkeley) have provided an articulate framework for further detachment from the legacy of Gibbon. In the process, they have also provided an excellent introduction to recent research in the field.

The title of the book contains the central concept behind the authors' approach. Rather than a decline or end of the imperial system of Augustus's Principate, they argue that in some areas the changes of the Late Roman empire should be seen as evolutions "which gave new direction to the historical process" (3). They examine this evolution from roughly the third through the fifth century through important themes: imperial administration, law, social and cultural identities, food supply and euergetism, religion, family, and social radicalism.

A few examples will suffice to illustrate the type of interpretation that Garnsey and Humfress propose. In their discussion of late Roman law, the authors argue that "the idea of a decline in legal skills and knowledge in late antiquity must be rejected. . . . Roman law continued to *evolve creatively*" (63–64). This evolution was marked by the rise of codification and the use of such collections of legal principles to arrive at "new practical solutions when the previous rules would not fit" (63). The rise of the ecclesiastical courts represented an even further adaptation. The authors find similar evolution in the practice of euergetism, the public benevolence of the upper classes which was a key support of civic infrastructure in the classical world. While they allow that "euergetism becomes less visible in the late empire," Garnsey and Humfress carefully demonstrate that "a dramatic decline of euergetic behavior simply did not happen" (116). Instead, euergetism was absorbed into the institutional functions of the Church, replacing its traditional modes of generosity but continuing to meet the underlying social needs. Lastly, with regard to religious beliefs and practices in late antiquity, the authors also present a strong case for evolution rather than discontinuity. This development was "the 'democratization' of theological reflection" (134). In both Christianity and "Paganism," there was a certain amount of blurring the official boundaries through syncretism, heresy, or simply evolving one's religious practice to meeting the letter but not the spirit of the law. Garnsey and Humfress conclude, "In sum, religious diversity persisted or even increased in late antiquity" (165).

By way of conclusion, Garnsey and Humfress historicize Gibbon's Rome in the final chapter of their book. Gibbon attributed Rome's fall to the "immoderate greatness" of its empire, a theme common in enlightenment political thought (217). Gibbon's aim was in part to comment on the state of European empires in his own

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time. He sought to show that they, unlike Rome, had made such progress in "arts and laws and manners" that they were not in the same immoderate danger of decline and fall (226).

This book is accessible to generalists and also fresh and rewarding for specialists. For use in an upper-level undergraduate course or graduate seminar it provides an up-to-date and concise survey of the field and well organized bibliography. For those studying patristic Christianity, chapter nine, "Social Radicalism—And its Limits" should also be highlighted. The authors contextualize unusual examples of Christian social radicalism such as Lactantius in favor of religious toleration, Gregory of Nyssa against slavery, and Augustine against torture. There is only one deficiency of the book worthy of note here. Due to its collaborative and thematic nature, the chapters of the book do not flow smoothly together and it lacks a true concluding chapter which could help unify its content. In spite of this, the authors have given readers much interesting material. Moreover, this book will stimulate further research in several areas of late antique history.

JUDITH HERRIN, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. Pp. 304. \$29.95.

Reviewed by David A. Michelson, Princeton University

In AD 787, the veneration of icons was vindicated by the so-called Seventh Ecumenical Council. The canons of this council were upheld against further iconoclast opposition in AD 843. In Eastern Orthodox traditions, this Triumph of Orthodoxy has long been attributed, at least in part, to the piety of saintly women who remained faithful in the face of largely male iconoclasm. While many modern scholars have discounted this interpretation as a hagiographical trope, Judith Herrin has called for a more nuanced approach in her recent book, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium*. She reconsiders the lives of three Byzantine empresses who had a hand in the restoration of iconophile doctrine. Without accepting the prejudices or stereotypes of the medieval sources, she nevertheless highlights the fact that these three women were able to wield a surprising amount of political and religious power.

The three empresses in question are Irene (r. 769–802), Euphrosyne (r. c. 820–829), and Theodora (r. 830–856). Besides iconophile affinity, family relation also connected these three women. Irene was Euphrosyne's grandmother. Euphrosyne, as step-mother to Theodora's husband, had hand-selected Theodora to become Empress. Herrin identifies three "resources which helped to legitimise" the exceptional power and ambition of these women in spite of the patriarchal power structure inherent in the Byzantine imperial system (241). The first resource was the symbolic authority of the Virgin in late antique and medieval society. Just as imperial propaganda depicted the emperor as a representative of God, so too the image of the empress was crafted to reflect glory of the Theotokos, the mother of God. Intimately connected with this image and with the power of the empress was "the essential role of the empresses in the construction of imperial dynasties" (243). Besides producing a male heir, the empress was also seen as an indispensable fig-