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Late Antiquity: Before and After*

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WE HAVE LIVED NOW THROUGH A LONG GENERATION of "late antique renaissance." I set for myself the task in this talk of trying to say concisely what difference that renaissance has made both for the field as narrowly constructed and for the wider field of "classics" itself.

DISCIPLINES IN MOTION

Formally, the story of late antiquity in the last decades resembles that of other periods and cultures. Where we inherited what looked like fundamentally sound narratives, built up laboriously and even heroically over time but still requiring supplementation and correction, narratives deploying characters whose identities could be grasped unambiguously, what we have come away with is a new appreciation for the way in which this period especially has been interpreted through constructions of narrative and constructions of identity that are at sharp variance with what we know about the people to whom they apply. Moreover, the constructions that have been in long use are often ones that go back to the late antique period itself. Hence when we accept them, we essentially connive with one party or another of that period to tell a story their way about people seen through their eyes.

The late antiquity that I know best is the period that has loomed largest in the scholarly debates of the last generation, roughly from Diocletian and the

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tetrarchy to Heraclius and the first defeats suffered at Islamic hands. In that period we now see first and foremost a series of contests among self-justifying contemporary narratives, many of which have had their appeal into our own day.

Chief among those narratives is the invention of classical antiquity itself. Roman dominance had long been marked culturally by acceptance of the authority of Greek texts and with the prestige of Greek culture supereminent, but by the fourth century, with the rise of a new class of *arriviste* aristocrats (the creation of Constantine) and with the loss of widespread facility with Greek in the Latin provinces of the empire, a new narrative was needed. The revival of "classical Latin" texts and authors (Juvenal, for example, and Tacitus) in this period, and the elaboration of school texts and school curricula (e.g., the writings of Donatus and the so-called *quadriga Messii* —Cicero, Sallust, Terence, and Vergil), gave first coherent shape to the reading lists that still survive in graduate departments of classics. The Nicomachi who read and copied Livy[1] were acting a new classicizing role, as were Augustine and his students and family when they retired to a country villa outside Milan in the winter of 386/7 and began enacting their own version of Ciceronian dialogues from Tusculum—even to the point of having scribes take down everything they said in shorthand for Augustine to publish as a display of his fidelity to Cicero and to his newfound philosophical ideas. That self-conscious enactment of the past persisted well into the sixth century and was probably only finally ended when the brutal efforts of Justinian to re-establish "The Roman Empire" in the west led, naturally enough, to its eradication. The *next* new class had few pretensions.[2]

We should not belittle the seriousness of the enterprise these writers were engaged upon. Macrobius in the *Saturnalia* musters up his threadbare learning (borrowing from Aulus Gellius and others in ways we would never let our students get away with) to create a portrait of his elders and betters of the previous generation enacting their own Ciceronian dialogue—a calque, if so I may call it, on the *De republica* of Cicero, though at the same time perhaps a veiled reply to Augustine's attempt to appropriate the Platonic-Ciceronian lineage in his *De civitate Dei*. In so doing, Macrobius is saying something important to himself and to his contemporaries about who and what they were precisely by attaching themselves to that particular past in that particular way.[3] The philosopher Boethius and his father-in-law Symmachus were

[1] They are known from the subscriptions to his manuscripts; see Zetzel.

[2] See Brown.

[3] On Macrobius and his position in these times, the classic article that had wide repercussions is Cameron 1966; on the rehabilitation of the "pagan" worthies see Hedrick.

the natural and very Christian, but very Roman, heirs of that exercise in self-creation.[4]

There was plenty of competition in the narrative business in those days. Christians of every stripe had found story-telling the way to make their new-age, high-tech (because text-based) religion prevail. They created a canon of texts out of the most improbable mix of materials, perhaps only completing that exercise in the fourth century.[5] That canon implied a narrative that generations of exegetes would elaborate, make explicit, and embroider. In one direction, it was fleshed out by the creation of narrative "world histories" by Eusebius and various translators and imitators, histories that underlie every other western version down to H. G. Wells and Will Durant with their succession of empires and civilizations from Mesopotamia to Egypt to Greece to Rome, and so forth. But at the local level there was intense rivalry to bring the scriptural story home. Tales of the desert fathers from the Greek east came west and were met by counter-narratives like those of Sulpicius Severus, advancing the claim that local saints, *here*, in the west, could be just as marvelous as those in the east, their lives just as reflective of the biblical narratives as those of Anthony or Pachomius.[6] Two hundred years later pope Gregory I would write *Dialogues* that made exactly the same point: the New Testament was being re-lived every day in the Italy of his time.[7]

The "papacy" was created as a kind of avatar of Roman religious authority chiefly in the fifth and sixth centuries and spawned its own authorized narrative, the *Liber pontificalis*, in which each pope, or *pontifex maximus* (a title still claimed by the present officeholder), had his own biography, added fresh when he died, to legitimate the line back to Peter. Competition among claimants to the papacy expressed itself in the production of competing versions of the pontifical book as early as the sixth century; to control the narrative helped to control the facts on the ground. This practice had been coming into view since the fourth century, when the so-called "Codex-Calendar of 354" included images of the traditional gods, a calendar of their feasts, and a list of bishops of Rome back to Peter.[8] Similar premature interest in the bishops of

[4] See Chadwick.

[5] See Hahneman.

[6] See Stancliffe.

[7] F. Clark (1987 and 2003) has fought hard to argue, and made some headway in doing so, that these dialogues evoke a "Gregory" who is already a seventh-century construction and that the pope did not write them himself. Gregory remains a figure of immense complexity and a source of still unexploited richness; see Straw and Markus.

[8] See Salzman.

Rome had emerged in the first Christian novel, an account written in Greek perhaps in the third century, but Latinized to a wide readership in the late fourth century. The pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones* purport to tell the story of the first pope Clement, who met and knew Peter while still in the east and eventually succeeded him in Rome. The account hasn't a prayer of being true, but it was as influential as only a historical novel can be in shaping consciousness and reassuring the uncertain.

Modern narratives of this period have long been in the thrall of these Christian accounts more than any others. That Gibbon depended as heavily as he did on the Jansenist Tillemont and the Roman cardinal Baronius ensured that the fundamental story of Christian orthodoxy, its rise and triumph, would persist from late antiquity into the most skeptical of modern writers until an astonishingly late date. The fracturing of that story began to gather momentum in Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*,[9] but even skeptical writers—and virtually all of the devout ones—for decades after still spoke of "Christianity" and not "Christianities" and blithely assumed that it was possible to apply litmus tests to differentiate brands of Christianity from one another (and usually to privilege one or two lines as normative) and equally to differentiate Christianity from other religious movements of the time. That confidence has been collapsing steadily over the last decades and its collapse is now most dramatic in recent work suggesting that Christianity and Judaism were far more closely intertwined and took their mature and eventually separate shapes in a long process of dialogue, disputation, and rivalry.[10]

To remember that we long accepted too uncritically self-serving stories about "Christians" should remind us that we have even more culpably been suckers for stories about "pagans." That conceptual category makes sense only as a Christian theological term for a subset of the enemies of any particular group of Christians. No person to whom the word might be attached would have understood or accepted its usefulness until at least decades after whatever "conflict between paganism and Christianity" might have existed was decisively over.[11] The persistence of the word in scholarly discourse, now

[9] English trans. under that title 1971, but originally in German in 1934.

[10] See Schwartz, and Becker and Reed (esp. the articles by P. Fredriksen, D. Boyarin, and R. Kraft); also important is King.

[11] On the word see O'Donnell; on the events of this period the most effective rewriting of traditional accounts has been that of MacMullen (1984, 1997). No one disputes that the "triumph" of Christianity was defined in a specific social register of official statements and practices, while traditional practices and beliefs persisted in myriad ways. Enthusiasts are often tempted to tell that story, but to supplement MacMullen with evidence rather than enthusiasm see Dowden.

burnished with the charm of fashionable disrepute, when its only function is to agglomerate the incomparable in a truly Borgesian taxonomy, is itself a sign of the often hidden but still fiercely present contestation over the place of Christianity in modern society that runs behind the scenes in discussions of early Christian history.

The other set of narratives heavily dependent on a construction of identity that has come under increased scrutiny is the set that tells us of "barbarians" and their adventures in the Roman world. In the work of Walter Goffart and Herwig Wolfram and others, the last two decades have seen an intense debate over "ethnogenesis" and "ethnopoesis"—the ways in which heterogeneous groups of people came together and accepted, or at least used, the identity of a national name (like "Visigoth" or "Vandal") to accompany their wanderings. The most recent and very exciting such investigation is Florin Curta's work *The Making of the Slavs*, which continues these explorations into the early medieval history of the Balkans and the emergence of a people that never existed until "Romans" decided they did. One reason we believe in these "tribes" and their generations-long *Völkerwanderungen*—we all know the maps with the large colored arrows meandering across central Europe and pointed eventually at Mediterranean shores—is that we have accepted the self-serving narratives of the early generations themselves. Jordanes was at pains in his *Getica* to reflect and focus the work of Cassiodorus setting out to make Gothic history Roman by showing that the Goths had a long and recognized place in the history of Europe. We always knew that the techniques of narration were flawed and the evidence risible, but that did not keep us (until very recently) from believing what Jordanes said when he described the origin of the Goths in southern Scandinavia, which he called *vagina gentium*, a phrase I primly Englished a generation ago as "womb of nations."[12]

What we now understand we could have learned from Cavafy or Coetzee,[13] that "barbarians" can be a kind of solution to a society's misunderstandings of itself and its world. I have found terrible poignancy and power in the classroom the last two years in bringing to students contemporary accounts of the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410, as nearly exact a parallel to the experience of 9/11 as could be imagined: "barbarian" invaders who had given full warning of their hostility and intent seized and sacked the city for three days. The shock felt through the Romanized world is proverbial—and deserves scrutiny.[14]

[12] Jordanes, *Getica* 4 Mommsen.

[13] Cavafy's famous poem is Englished "Waiting for the Barbarians" and gave a title to Coetzee's novel.

[14] See the traditionalist reading in Courcelle.

> And I was stunned and stupefied, so much so that I couldn't think about anything else day and night. I felt as if I were being held hostage myself and couldn't even open my mouth until I knew for sure what had happened. Hanging there, caught between hope and despair, I was torturing myself with the thought of what others were suffering. But after the brightest light of all the lands was extinguished—after the head of the whole Roman empire was lopped off—to speak truly, after the whole world had perished in a single city, I fell silent and was humbled, and I kept my silence and my sorrow was renewed. My heart grew warm within me and fire blazed up in my thoughts.[15]

That is Jerome reacting in far-off Bethlehem, and we read his words as though they were written in September of 2001, not of 410. But Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, the calmest and most thoughtful response to those events, resolutely refuses to focus on the "enemy" or the "barbarian" and takes instead a long view. Few would share his theology of history today, but he is a salubrious example of the benefits of thinking in larger and longer terms.[16]

Augustine's disciple Orosius—one might almost say his henchman, for all that Orosius never understood a tithe of what Augustine was saying—propagates influentially the unsubtler view. After a stylized and defensive account of the sack of Rome (concentrating on an elderly and pious virgin who was rescued by a compassionate barbarian), he tells a story about how a few years later in fashionable Bethlehem he met a senior statesman who boasted of meeting the Visigothic king Athaulf at Narbonne. Athaulf had sworn, so it was reported, that he had always dreamt of wiping out the very name of Rome and turning the Roman realm into a Gothic one, making "Romania" into "Gothia."[17] But Athaulf, in this story, had learnt the blessings of laws (*sine quibus respublica non est respublica*) and seen the inability of Goths to conform themselves to law, so he devoted himself instead to seeking glory as the restorer of the Roman name, since he could not be the revolutionary he wanted to be. I do not believe that story for a minute, but I want to emphasize the frame as well as the story: Bethlehem as site, a distinguished narrator, and a surprisingly pious "barbarian" as subject who, it turns out, understands the conflict exactly as his opponents do. The fifth century would continue to shape and be shaped by such constructed views of barbarism. In the long run, when

[15] Jerome, *On Ezechiel* 1.praef., my translation.

[16] For the "presidential panel" staged one day before this presidential address was given, I invited as keynote speaker Stewart Brand, co-chair of the board of directors of the Long Now Foundation. His presentation on the discipline and value of thinking in longer historical terms is available on the APA website, http://www.apaclassics.org.

[17] Orosius 7.40–43.

Rome proved unable to prosecute its hostility to successful conclusion—that is, proved unable to establish its preferred narrative by force of arms—the choice to demonize the other proved disastrous.

One last identity, one last player in these narratives, needs to be made explicit to complete this inevitably superficial list: Rome itself. The remaking of the idea of Rome, like the reshaping of the city,[18] was an essential part of the mental history of these times. Every alternate construction of Christian, pagan, or barbarian depended, consciously and unconsciously, on an underlying continuity of Rome. Whatever the city of Rome was, whatever the chain of events that led from 753 B.C.E. to the age of Constantine or of Alaric, the "Rome function" was a powerful ideological force that had grown, without anyone being fully aware of it, beyond the city and community that had given rise to it.

The irony, of course, is that there were other barbarians around the empire of whom the Romans did not speak, barbarians they shared with Persia, who would indeed live Athaulf's dream and whose own laboriously constructed (and highly derivative) identity is with us still, contesting with other heirs of Rome like ourselves for control of the narrative.[19]

In their ways, each of the narratives and identities I have explored here is familiar to us—too familiar. The last thing to be said about what happened in late antiquity is that the heirs of those particular constructions, seduced by the power of their imaginations, believed they lived in the world they described and so were led to overreach, with fatal consequences for their own intentions. Justinian sought to restore his vision of the Roman empire and to evict the barbarians from their western thrones in Africa, Italy, and Spain.[20] He succeeded only in destablizing those societies, damaging their physical fabric, and weakening his own ability to respond to threats in Balkan and Syrian directions. Justinian's invasion of Italy brought an end to the political cohesiveness of the peninsula that the Romans had laboriously achieved six hundred years earlier, and cohesiveness of political and social experience in that peninsula has proved elusive to this day. By the time Justinian died, his court was a veritable Kremlin of intrigue and suspicion[21] and his forces were

[18] Memorably displayed by Krautheimer.

[19] On the pervasive and persistent ancient underpinnings of later history in this part of the world, Millar and Bowersock (1983 and esp. 1990) are immensely rewarding. Kaegi gets beyond cliché to understanding the contingencies that led to Islamic success.

[20] Justinian remains too large a figure for any single study in our time to capture. Rubin began to pursue him but was derailed by contemporary political developments.

[21] Averil Cameron's 1976 edition of Corippus' *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris* seemed eerily prescient of the transitions that would take place in Moscow with the deaths of Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko in the decade to follow.

fatally overextended. Heraclius a generation later was successful in his military activities beyond the wildest dreams of Justinian, but was in the end a failure because he could not anticipate the Islamic challenge accurately and had not the resources left to address it. The Roman empire did not, it is conventional to say, decline and fall; it persisted in Constantinople till 1453. But what was there, outwardly Roman and continuous with what had gone before, was increasingly incoherent and unable to match its sense of self to its reality because it knew too clearly what it was and what it had been. The identity and the narrative that it had constructed for itself proved finally inadequate to the task at hand.[22] They never found an Augustus who could help them imagine a future sufficiently robust yet clothe it in dress sufficiently traditional to persuade them that it really was the same, good, old Rome—and then carry off the imposture militarily.

The tasks remaining for late antique scholarship are still breathtaking. If we lose faith in received narratives and if we aren't sure just who the people are, we will have the opportunity to see a world with fewer boundaries and more places, fewer peoples and more people.[23] Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, in *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, an immense volume that promises a second, pick up at least some of what the young Peter Brown might have imagined in a Braudelian take on Justinian's Mediterranean, and carry off their explorations with bravura effect. Their picture of that world resists generalization fiercely as they seek to do justice to as many local variations and time-based idiosyncrasies as the dimensions of an oversize printed book and the patience and concentration of their readers will allow. That diversification, complexification, and enrichment of our picture of late antiquity can only continue.[24]

[22] The books that the general reader might fall upon to approach Byzantine history are singularly out of date and unhelpful in the main. Vasiliev's and Ostrogorsky's histories, still in print and magisterial in their day, are pre-World War II in their roots and scholarship, while the widely available volumes of John Julius Norwich are, in the words of one trenchant contemporary observer, firmly grounded in the scholarship of Gibbon. The best current narrative account is the very cautious and traditional Treadgold 1997, or, smaller in compass, Treadgold 2001; but the revolution beneath the surface of post-classical Greek studies has yet to produce a widely accessible book. Margaret Alexiou's work, particularly Alexiou 2002, repays the patient reader abundantly.

[23] One difficulty is nomenclature. I use "late antiquity" throughout as a convenient and conventional term, but it is remarkable that there is no term in use for the period 200–700 C.E. in the Mediterranean world that is not in some way derivative: late antiquity, sub-Roman, later Roman, early medieval, early Byzantine, post- or pre- something. . . . What would this period be if it had its own name?

[24] For example, look at the more recent titles in the enormously influential series *The Transformation of the Classical Heritage* edited by Peter Brown for the University of California

CONSEQUENCES

Scholarship has consequences. Investigation explodes errors constantly and reveals truths that must be allowed to change the way we think and act. I pursued this account of the scholarly achievement of the last generation of students of late antiquity because I believe it has direct relevance to the concerns of *ex professo* classicists, that is, of members of the American Philological Association. I will begin with a blunt assertion.

The traditional construction of "classics" as a domain of study depends on a narrative. We are not like philosophers or theologians or economists, who have a body of subject matter and a set of techniques; or like biologists or chemists or physicists, who divide their tasks by the scale of the natural phenomena they study; or like historians or political scientists, who have a potentially unlimited domain of inquiry but a collection of disciplines and practices. We share features of self-definition with each of those groups, but our work has been critically defined, for at least the last two hundred years, by a story.[25] We all know the story and use it and refer to it every day, and everyone else knows the story. The chain bookstores use the story to arrange their shelves, and we depend on it when we try to explain to strangers what we do. It's a good story: Greeks, then Romans, then the Middle Ages—and somebody else is responsible for the Middle Ages. We build our departmental staffing around the narrative, making sure to be strong in "central" periods and figures, because we know all too surely where the margins and borders are. How many of us have courses on the books in "Greek History" (which usually means Bronze Age to Alexander, with perhaps a quick tailpiece about Hellenistic history) and "Roman History" (which means Italian prehistory and goes down to some date between Augustus and Justinian, on the assumption that events in second century C.E. Asia Minor are best recounted as episodes in the political history of a people that started from the Tiber valley most of a thousand years earlier). In accepting this particular story, of course, we are in connivance with the Romans and their notion of empire. They saw themselves as worthy successors, not as interlopers, and though they never imposed

Press since 1981: the topics range from Merovingian archaeology to Byzantine angelology to the fortunes of a saint caught between Byzantium and Persia.

[25] The APA began, as many know, with a more synoptic view of its philological endeavors, ranging from Sanskrit to modern European languages to native American languages. Already from its first decade the concentration on "classics" was clear, and the formation of the Modern Language Association in 1883 gave many of our philological colleagues a different natural home. By 1900 the narrowing to "classics" was nearly complete, though papers on Sanskrit would appear in *TAPA* until the 1920s. (For the early history see Shero and Dickey.)

their language on the more prosperous and populous half of their domains, they had no difficulty imagining themselves lords of all they surveyed, from Hadrian's Wall to the Euphrates and beyond.[26]

A resident of Ephesus or Antioch or Gaza might have had a different and more nuanced perspective. Libanius certainly did. The Greek world was particularly full of perfectly respectable denizens whose relationship to any putative Romanness was at best remote, and the important stretches of empire that spoke more Syriac or Coptic than Greek had their own ways of coming to grips with Rome.

The message from late antique scholarship to the classical disciplines today is that the old story won't work any longer. It is not so much that Rome did not fall as it is that the Rome people imagined was transformed into something else. Dealing with the failure of that traditional narrative to sustain itself will be a central task, I believe, for classicists as well as late antiquers of the next generation.

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[26] Dihle tries to dress a different and more balanced view than the one we are accustomed to.

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