

Edward J. Watts, *Riot in Alexandria: Tradition and Group Dynamics in Late Antique Pagan and Christian Communities*. The Transformation of the Classical Heritage, 46. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2010. Pp. xvi + 290. ISBN: 978-0-520-26207-2.

The structure of this book is at once simple and intriguing. The account is made to revolve around a few days of increasing unrest and violence in the spring of 486 during the episcopate of the Miaphysite Peter Mongus. Our main source for those particular events is the *Life of Severus* by Zacharias of Mytilene (Zacharias Scholasticus). What starts largely as a student fracas quickly draws together three major forces in the city: the students themselves (many of them Christians, but taught more frequently than not by pagans); local ascetics (both those committed to an ordered life and those lay enthusiasts – *philoponoi* or *spoudaioi* – less formally associated with monasteries); and, in the end, the bishop himself. The echoes of Hypatia's murder, some seventy years earlier, are evident; but the circumstances have significantly changed.

Dr Watts has several points to make. He asks, first, how loyalties can be dissolved and reassigned. Pagan intellectuals are remarkable in their survival, but increasingly under pressure. Ascetics are ambiguous in their attitudes to philosophy, but eager to harness the collaboration of student admirers. The bishop, meanwhile, able to count on a general local antagonism towards Chalcedonian orthodoxy, has yet to be cautious in his use of what have become traditional ploys: the demonizing of pagans and the beguiling of monks. The three social forces – the school, the monastery, and the church – are sturdy institutions with strong internal bonds. Yet, the events of the week under review demonstrate how difficult that makes creative accommodation, the ability to ride the wave of change to any one group's advantage. The interface between those groups has to be made in some way more permeable, so that individual criticism can gain practical purchase.

The author's second question, therefore, is how such tightly bonded systems can be set up in the first place. It is here, for over 200 pages, that the book divides into three major studies. Schools, monasteries, and churches (in this last case, overwhelmingly the church in Alexandria) construct their identities by the forging of a history, very much wise after the event, and expressed and preserved in texts, biographies above all. Dr Watts is prepared here, at least in relation to schools and monasteries, to range broadly in the empire, although largely in the Greek world. The basic assertion is not startlingly novel, but the book's particular virtue lies in the way loyalty – to individuals of singular significance – is seen as biography's chief purpose and effect.

The third question centres on the breakdown of such a system. How could an individual adjust his historical alignment? How could he acknowledge a duty of loyalty to alternative heroes? Dr Watts does not put it quite this bluntly, but the detail of his third, episcopal analysis (at a time of immense doctrinal and political complexity) suggests to me that the answer will lie 'on the ground'. There needs to be a shared cadre between at least two of the groups. This is indeed, according to the author, what

happened. Christian students were able to claim an aggressive victory against their pagan teachers because they had also attached themselves to equally cohesive social groups, the local monks. (The author's allusions are broader still, because several of the players in Alexandria were also involved with ascetic groups around Gaza.)

The result was not the simple triumph of irrationality, because the student victors retained their attachment to philosophical values. What matters even more, in my opinion, is the mastery of Peter Mongus who, in a concluding *tour de force*, is able to retain some mastery over the outcome (he died, after all, in his episcopal bed: not the good fortune one would have confidently foreseen). Dr Watts is skilful in identifying the political resources at a bishop's disposal, and makes no bones about Peter's craft in living up to his predecessors' reputations (against pagans and for monks) without straining the fabric of his community. We are treated in the process to a clear account of how the figures of Athanasius, Theophilus, and Cyril – *that* history – were constantly reconfigured in the service of the current bishop. (They were, not least, great builders, redesigning the ancient city, which makes them interestingly comparable to westerners like Damasus and Ambrose – not a vein mined here.) The author offers, nevertheless, a telling and valuable comment on the specific (and novel) power of the post-Chalcedonian bishop, as well as on the pressure of imperial politics over which he often had little control.

This makes for a provoking and at times perceptive account, and many details are usefully rehearsed. Yet the structure of the book is not only simple and intriguing but also slow-moving and repetitive. By its very nature, the argument demands the reappearance of major players in its different sections, and there is a resulting degree of starting from scratch and the recycling of phrases and judgements – even whole paragraphs. One is afflicted at times with a feeling that a course of events is not surprising (how students, for example, regarded the great figures of their past), prompting the question of how one would expect otherwise. Dr Watts also has to steer his way through a bevy of recent authors who have handled his grander themes – Claudia Rapp, Susan Wessel, Cornelia Horn (all fully acknowledged) – and sometimes makes it difficult to see what he has said that reaches beyond them. The integrating features of the argument remain of greatest importance, therefore; and they succeed in raising questions that certainly have not been answered yet, and need answering. Dr Watts has suggested where the gold is buried, and helps us to address the enduringly tantalizing question of how so traditional a society became so different in its innovations.

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