

**Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*.** Princeton University Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-691-15290-5.

In the preface to *Through the Eye of a Needle* Peter Brown remarks that this is the most difficult book to write that he has ever undertaken. Certainly it is a hard book to classify. It is about wealth, as implied by the title and stated openly in the subtitle: but that does not make it a work of economic history. It also deals with the other topics of the subtitle: the Fall of Rome and the making of Western Christianity. In other words, its scope is unusual, and unusually challenging.

It is not, however, a difficult book to place within Brown's own oeuvre. Here he returns to many of the thinkers and themes that have concerned him throughout his career. Augustine is at the centre, and dominates much of the first two thirds of the volume, which in some ways can be read as a revision of *Augustine of Hippo*, published way back in 1967. In returning to the field Brown makes much of the saint's newly discovered letters and sermons. Equally important, he sets the bishop of Hippo more firmly within the context of his contemporaries than he did forty-five years ago. In this respect we are closer to the last section of his study of *The Body and Society* of 1988, with its emphasis on Ambrose and Jerome.

Here, however, we are introduced to a much fuller gallery of contemporaries, including Ausonius, Paulinus of Nola, Priscillian, Damasus, Ambrosiaster, Rufinus, Melania and Pinian, Pelagius, the Sicilian Briton, Julian of Eclanum, Sulpicius Severus, Paulinus of Pella, Cassian, Prosper of Aquitaine, Salvian, and Leo the Great. The lives and ideas of all of these figures, and others, are vividly characterised and dissected. This, then, is an ideal starting point for anyone wanting to familiarise themselves with the vast majority of the leading intellectual figures of the West in the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

There is also a good deal more on the monasticism of the fifth century – as defined by Augustine and as found in Provence – than in any other of Brown's writings. The rise of monasticism is, naturally, closely associated with the abandonment of wealth, and indeed provides one entrée into the topic. But it is not only the ascetic movement that impacted on attitudes towards wealth. Indeed, we meet pagans as well as Christians who were less than enamoured of the notion that one should alienate one's inheritance. Yet above all, we meet bishops, who made their views very clear in sermons and letters, and who take us closer to the world explored by Brown in his works on *Power and Persuasion* (of 1992), *Authority and the Sacred* (of 1995) and *Poverty and Leadership* (of 2002) – for wealth itself is not an entirely new theme within Brown's oeuvre.

In many ways, then, this is a socio-religious study of attitudes to and the use of wealth in the context of the spread of Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries. It involves a close analysis of the aristocracy and of the poor. In the course of the fourth and fifth centuries these groups changed – in the fourth century there were the super-rich and

those of lesser wealth, together with those defined as poor (who were not the poor of our imagination, but rather the less-well-off citizens). The political shake-up caused by the arrival of the barbarians effectively shattered the wealth of the super-rich (and this is not a book which downplays crisis), while the less wealthy did survive, but as regional aristocracies, who depended increasingly on their managerial skills – skills also required by bishops. The poor turned into something closer to our poor. Wealth, its uses, and attitudes towards it, thus become a series of hooks on which to examine the history of the transformation of western Europe in the fourth, fifth, and early sixth centuries – and transformation does not necessarily mean slight and gentle change. In many ways, then, this is a book to set aside the earlier part of Brown's *The Rise of Western Christendom* of 1996.

With its emphasis on Augustine, however, this is a story in which the emphasis is very much on the late fourth and early fifth centuries: the century from 350 to 450 gets much more attention than that from 450 to 550. In part this reflects the nature of our sources: Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Paulinus of Nola, Pelagius, and some of his followers, have much more to say about wealth than do writers of the ensuing generations. Few intellectuals of the period from Sidonius to Gregory of Tours are so amenable to the type of analysis that Brown pursues. Yet there are luminous pages here on Julianus Pomerius, on Ennodius and on the leading actors of the Laurentian schism. One wonders, therefore, whether Caesarius, Cassiodorus, and Avitus of Vienne (in his poetry, and especially in his retelling of the Dives and Lazarus story in the *De sententia Dei*) might have deserved more, or even some, consideration. And one might also wonder whether Brown's reading of Sidonius is too simple – or rather too inclined to take the bishop of Clermont at his own word. His epitaph does not quite chime with Brown's portrait of the man: it talks of his episcopate, and in a very interesting way (*Et post talia dona Gratiarum/ Summi pontificis sedens cathedram/ Mundanos suboli refudit actus*). Sidonius the ecclesiastic passes on his earthly occupations to his offspring – a statement that modifies Gregory of Tours' picture of the incompetent bishop: but then Gregory disliked Sidonius' son. The epitaph also talks of his legislation for barbarians (*Leges barbarico dedit furori*) – of which not a word in his letters. Sidonius' self-image is probably in need of a more questioning glance.

The cut-off point in the mid sixth century means, of course, that this is very much a study of Late Antiquity and not of the Early Middle Ages – and in this respect it is much closer to Brown's *Augustine* than to *The Rise of Western Christendom*. In one other respect it is much more a work of late-antique rather than early-medieval scholarship. Brown inevitably takes as his starting point Matthew 19, 21-6: 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven....' We hear much about the selling of treasure: we also hear about the giving of estates – and indeed the main pieces of evidence on income and on the scale of landholding are referred to – but Brown never pauses over the difference between land and moveable wealth, which for an early medievalist is a key distinction. Of course there may have been heirlooms among the jewelry sold to give gold to churches, but usually a Roman

aristocrat could replenish his or her treasury. To give family estates had more permanent implications. As Barbara Rosenwein has established, donations to churches established long-term relations with a church: the donor became a neighbour of the saint. In *Through the Eye of a Needle* we hear of plenty of bequests to churches, but many of them may have been of treasure, which would have been entirely in line with earlier gifts to the gods, for Roman temples do not seem to have been significantly endowed with land. Brown notes that initially not much in the way of property was given to the church or churches, and that it was relatively late on that churches could compete with the secular aristocracy, probably only in the sixth century – yet the shift from giving treasure to giving land might perhaps have been put under the microscope, though to do so one would probably need to work back from the later evidence of the charters, and thus from the period immediately following that covered here. Yet in emphasizing the growing significance of the managerial from the late fifth century onwards Brown perhaps underplays the spiritual significance of the transfer of the land of western Europe to the service of God.

This, however, is to read the book with an eye to what happened next – and for that one can turn to *The Rise of Western Christendom*. As it is, Brown tells an extremely complex story, though he does so with great lucidity: he has taken enormous care to include signposts to mark every stage in his argument. It is of course stylishly told, and full of striking images, not least of sites still surviving. The writing is also extremely generous: Brown has kind words for many a scholar. Essentially *Through the Eye of a Needle* is an extraordinarily rich addition to our understanding of socio-religious history of Late Antiquity, building on and indeed revising Brown's own earlier readings.

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