

Mark Humphries, *Cities and the Meanings of Late Antiquity*. Brill Research Perspectives, Volume 2, Issue 4. Brill: Leiden, 2019. ISBN: 978-90-04-42260-5. List price: EUR: 70 / US\$: 84.

Cities and the Meanings of Late Antiquity (hereafter, *CMLA*) is one of the latest issues of the new *Brill Research Perspectives in Ancient History*, a peer-reviewed journal designed to provide comprehensive review articles about important topics of ancient history between the Bronze Age and late antiquity. While previous issues published since 2018 have surveyed Spartan manpower problems, Roman water culture, Roman imperialism, imperial cult, and the function of Roman coinage, this new essay offers their first issue dedicated to a late antique topic—the study of the meaning and value of cities for historical narratives of late antiquity.

CMLA provides a valuable state-of-the-field overview of the historiographic debate surrounding late antique urbanism as well as recent trends in urban studies. The essay's starting point is the recognition that the late antique city functions as a bellwether for broader historical debates about the end of the ancient world. While traditionally historians once read the 'fate' of late antique cities as obvious indicators of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, urban centers became important in the scholarship of the late twentieth century in demonstrating elements of continuity and change in society, economy, and culture. Yet, as studies of late antique urbanism have proliferated, especially in the form of detailed archaeological reports, some scholars have begun to doubt the optimistic view of continuity and redefinition and reasserted older models of urban decline. This rethinking has ushered in a "period of retrenchment and crisis" for "the Brownian vision of a progressively dynamic late antiquity" (7). *CMLA* seeks to provide a pathway through different extremes.

Humphries approaches the subject by underscoring the value of multiple perspectives and vantage points. Eschewing monolithic pictures of late antique urbanism as either predominantly negative (decline and fall) or positive (continuity and change), Humphries instead draws attention to the myriad local and regional urban contexts and lived experiences that led to different fortunes in different places for different groups of people. In one respect, Humphries considers a variety of late antique cities throughout his essay to provide views of change from different parts of the ancient world (Europe, the Mediterranean, and Near East) and different centuries of late antiquity (the third and fourth centuries, after all, were very different than the sixth to eighth). In another respect, Humphries approaches the subject of late antique cities through a range of lenses—conceptual, political, economic, religious, and performative—and bodies of evidence (inscriptions, topography, literature, archaeology) which highlight the complexities of local contexts and the contingencies of change. As the author frequently reminds the reader, multi-modal and interdisciplinary approaches to urbanism help scholars avoid the biases of presuppositions and the prioritization of singular forms of evidence (86–88). Reading late antique cities through a "multiplicity of diverse and often overlapping micro-

narratives” (86) encourages more nuanced narratives of late antiquity and a vision of cities as “variably dynamic, ever changing, and pulsing with life” (90).

The individual sections of the essay show a sharp analytical edge combined with judicious treatment of evidence that draw attention to the local complexities and dynamism of urban life. Cities, for example, remained central to the way that elite imagined and conceived of their civilization and identities (16–31): the tradition of classical *ekphraseis* continues but now incorporating forms of urban amenities and architecture (e.g., walls and churches) that reflect shifts toward fortified landscapes and the changing religious characters of populations. States continued to have a major impact on urban life (31–44) through the growth of imperial courts in the third and fourth centuries, the development of a new megalopolitan center in the fourth to sixth (Constantinople), the significant *adventus* ceremonials throughout, and varied forms of exchange between urban centers and emperors or kings (e.g., imperial family, images of the emperor, imperial agents, and administrative facilities such as mints); yet, such influence was uneven according to the intensity and directness of state intervention and involvement. The economic changes of a long late antiquity likewise affected cities in fundamentally uneven ways as “local variations were a feature generally of economic life in late antiquity” (48). One can find evidence for decline and prosperity in different regions in the same province and even in the same city: archaeological investigations at Rome, for instance, suggest that different imperial *fora* had different histories (47). Religious change in urban centers (52–64) was tremendous, of course, as new leadership (bishops) and building types (Christian basilicas) emerged, but Christianization was only one of a number of processes of late antique urban change, and civic landscapes remained “the physical residues of various interest groups in the city” who worked against one another as much as they worked in tandem (p. 58). In one of the most interesting sections of the essay (64–82), Humphries underlines the continuing role of the city as a performance stage for casting social hierarchy, status, and power through a variety of ceremony: scholars could do more, he notes, to bring together different sorts of evidence to imagine the sensory experience of late antique cities.

CMLA provides a sharp and balanced synthesis of major issues surrounding late antique urbanism. This reviewer appreciated the author’s interest in reconsidering literary and epigraphical sources (the standard body of evidence historians used to write histories of the city in the last century) alongside the abundant new archaeological evidence; the author’s conceptual approach that situated cities within a comprehensive frame of analysis (rather than, say, simple topographical description); and an emphasis on regionalism and interdisciplinary approaches. While I would have liked to see a bit more archaeological discussion (texts tend to dominate), material culture is used productively and critically to sometimes strengthen, sometimes challenge literary evidence.

Readers of *The Ancient History Bulletin* should take stock of this valuable new series published by Brill dedicated specifically to topics of ancient history. What is there not

to like about state-of-the-field interpretive essays that provide cogent syntheses of important topics in less than a hundred pages? Busy professors and frantic graduate students can drop into academic topics for a few hours to gain a quick view of the lay of the land or find inspiration for papers, theses, and dissertations. It is unfortunate that the issues are priced too high to assign as books for undergraduate courses, but teachers may at least make use of institutional digital subscriptions to supplement readings for courses. Let's hope all the issues of *Brill Research Perspectives in Ancient History* are as well-written and presented as *Cities and Meanings of Late Antiquity*. Given that these essays will be updated periodically (according to the series website), they should provide an important new resource for ancient historians and their students.

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