

Empire and Religion in the Roman World. Edited by Harriet I. Flower. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 277 pp. \$99.99; paperback \$32.99.

This collection of essays honors the career of Brent D. Shaw, recently retired Professor of Classics at Princeton University, a historian of the Roman Empire specializing in the social, economic, demographic, and cultural history of Roman Africa and the Mediterranean world. The volume comprises an Introduction and eleven chapters by leading scholars of Late Antiquity, ending with a bibliography of Shaw's publications. While the chapters are divided into two parts under the headings "Empire" and "Religion," Harriet Flower introduces the essays under three principal interconnected themes: boundaries and networks, religious innovation and competition, and diverse forms of violence within and between communities. She highlights cultural, social, and religious aspects of the late antique Mediterranean that have been major subjects of Brent Shaw's innovative scholarly interventions and the inspiration for the original contributions in the volume. Early Christianity is a central focus of the collection.

The four chapters in Part I, "Empire," explore the following topics: disease, specifically the Antonine plague as an imperial event (Kyle Harper); two diverse frontier zones integrated into the imperial system—Rome's Atlantic rim (Carlos Noreña) and the ancient countryside (Clifford Ando); and the Jewish War against Rome (Erich Gruen). While none of these chapters deals with Christianity, they provide important contexts for studying its rise to dominance in the Roman Empire.

For readers of *Church History*, the chapters in Part II, "Religion," will be of special interest. Sabine Huebner's essay, "The First Christian Family of Egypt," begins with the still murky transition from pagan cults to the embrace of Christianity in the third century. Analyzing the earliest known Christian letter from Egypt, a papyrus dating from the 230s, Huebner throws new light on the backgrounds and social realities of the earliest Egyptian Christians, showing the religion's spread beyond urban centers to the Egyptian countryside. Eric Rebillard directly addresses Christianity's spread in the Roman Empire. Focusing on the earliest centuries of the church, Rebillard challenges traditional as well as newer explanations for Christian expansion, arguing that Christianity did not spread through the activities of missionaries, pious merchants, or freelance religious experts. While he does not develop a clear alternative, he points to the Jewish diaspora as a primary network of Christianity's diffusion and affirms the need for further "network thinking" in tackling such questions (154).

Examining diverse social contexts in which Christians pursued lives of piety in late antiquity, Claudia Rapp challenges accepted scholarly assumptions about the nature of monastic life in the Roman Empire. A triumvirate of monastic theoreticians—Jerome, Cassian, and Benedict—defined eremitic and coenobitic monasticism as the proper forms of monastic life while condemning a "third kind" of monk: those who did not live in hierarchically structured monasteries under a rule but rather wandered or lived in small groups, often in an urban context, and engaged in economic activities. Rapp shows how pronouncements of theoreticians, considered together with other types of evidence, reveal a substantial "middle ground" of pious lifestyles pursued by monks and devout laypeople alike, in both east and west. Forms of economic activity and participation in the liturgy, she concludes, are key in "unraveling the binary oppositions that have become paradigmatic in the study of monastic history" (180): desert vs. city, communal vs. individual, and monastic vs. lay forms of piety.

The next two chapters engage specific authors and their works, the poet Ausonius of Bordeaux and the bishop, Augustine of Hippo. Mark Vessey's highly specialized essay, "Ausonius at the Edge of Empire," is not really about religion and would have been better placed in Part I. By contrast, Catherine Conybeare offers a masterful yet accessible analysis of the metaphor of *peregrinatio* in Augustine's writings. She begins with his own identity as a deracinated *peregrinus*, an African in Italy and never fully at home even in his native land, and traces Augustine's many uses of *peregrinatio* in his sermons on the Psalms. Eschewing a single definition of the rich Latin metaphor, often translated as "living abroad" or "living away from home," Conybeare shows how he used the term more often for spiritual than spatial displacement, for the pain of wandering as much as the joy of transience. For Augustine, the metaphor combined grief and joy, painful acknowledgement of one's distance from God yet pleasure at the anticipation of return. Integrating theoretical insights from Derrida, yet firmly rooted in Augustine's Roman imperial world, Conybeare's essay will be instructive for classicists, literary scholars, theologians, and historians alike.

The latest chronologically, Glen Bowersock's brief essay presents pre-Islamic Arabia as a region of great geographical, ethnic, tribal, and religious diversity, "a cauldron of conflicting beliefs and competing leaders" (233). Focusing on Muhammad's prophetic rivals, including a woman, he shows how these messenger-prophets unsuccessfully sought alliances, often across vast geographically diverse regions. Muhammad, meanwhile, sought alliances closer to home and ultimately succeeded in forming a sufficiently populous base to move beyond the Arabian peninsula, eventually challenging both Roman imperial centers.

In the final chapter, Peter Brown presents an intellectual profile of Brent Shaw. Referencing his many influential works since the late 1970s—on such wide-ranging topics as the rural economy, nomadism, family history, the emotions, martyrs, bandits, and violence—Brown describes Shaw as "a connoisseur of power from the ground up" (242). He praises his important work as a reviewer of great books, especially his penetrating responses to major works concerning the transition from the ancient to the medieval world, culminating in Shaw's plea to "de-periodize" (247). Brown concludes, appropriately, with Shaw's major books of the past two decades, especially *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge, 2011), where he brilliantly captures the great paradoxes of African society in the fourth and fifth century.

Like many collective volumes, the essays in *Empire and Religion* seem disjointed, and the book's organization is opaque. One would have wished for greater conversation between chapters, originally presented as papers at a 2017 conference celebrating Shaw's retirement. This lack of interaction obscures the three overlapping themes discussed in the Introduction. Yet the individual essays, each with its own bibliography, are of the very highest quality, examining new evidence and offering fresh methodological insights inspired by the wide-ranging research of Brent Shaw himself. For historians of Christianity in Late Antiquity the volume is particularly valuable. Both individually and collectively, the essays elucidate the political and geographical landscape in which Christianity emerged, the networks that facilitated its spread, and the intertwined social, economic, and religious contexts in which diverse expressions of the faith took shape in the Mediterranean world.

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