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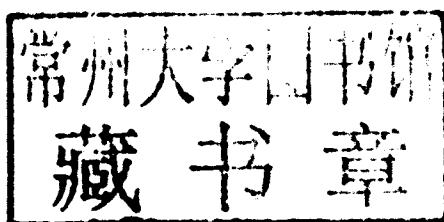
The Oxford Handbook of
LATE
ANTIQUITY

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

LATE ANTIQUITY

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OXFORD
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Published in the United States of America
by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The Oxford handbook of late antiquity /edited by Scott Fitzgerald Johnson.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-533693-1

1. Civilization, Greco-Roman. 2. Civilization, Medieval. 3. Rome—Civilization.
4. Byzantine Empire—Civilization—527–1081.

I. Johnson, Scott Fitzgerald, 1976– II. Title: Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity.

DE80.O84 2012

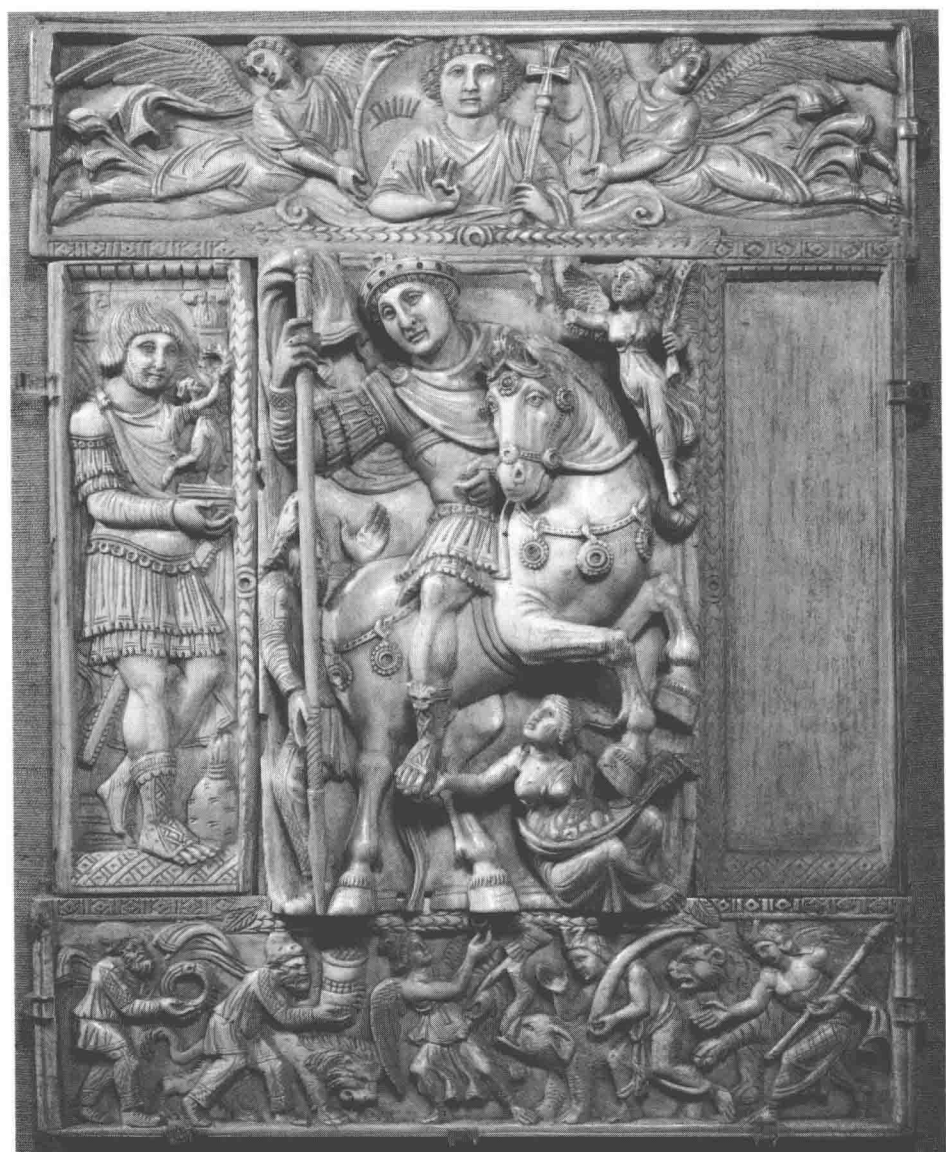
937—dc23 2011018578

Frontispiece: The Barberini Ivory, depicting a sixth-century Roman emperor,
possibly Anastasius I or Justinian I (Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY).

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United State of America
on acid-free paper

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LATE ANTIQUITY



To Averil Cameron and Peter Brown

PREFACE: ON THE UNIQUENESS OF LATE ANTIQUITY

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IN the year 845 C.E., in a monastery scriptorium in the northwest corner of Ireland, some 3,748 explanations of Latin grammatical points in the language of Old Irish were added by a pair of scribes to a precious manuscript of the *Institutiones grammaticae* (*Elements of Latin Grammar*) by the late antique scholar Priscian (Hofman 1996; Stokes and Strachan 1901). These represent some of the very first instances of an important vernacular tradition in Europe and testify to the vibrant intellectual culture of early medieval Ireland (figure 0.1; Law 1982). The Old Irish scribes were working in a far-flung corner of the former Roman world—really just outside of what was the Roman world at its greatest extent. Their exemplar, Priscianus Caesariensis, had written his influential Latin grammar during the reign of the emperor Anastasius I (see frontispiece) in the Greek milieu of the sixth-century capital of Constantinople, three hundred years prior and half a world away (Averil Cameron 2009; Kaster 1988, no. 126). Constantinople and Ireland are two strange bedfellows, in the ancient world as much as today; yet such boundaries as existed were crisscrossed again and again during Late Antiquity, perhaps even more so at the end than at the beginning, despite the old “Dark Ages” chestnut. Cliché or no, this story is one of intellectual transmission; that is, to quote a recent popular history (Cahill 1995), whether or not the Irish actually “saved” ancient civilization, these scribes were participating in it fully.

Half a century earlier than these Irish scribes, a different sort of real-world *diglossia* was put on display in central China. In 781 C.E., a large stele was set up, inscribed with both Chinese and Syriac inscriptions, to commemorate 150 years of East Syriac (aka “Nestorian”) Christian presence in the T’ang capital of Xi’an (figure 0.2). The stele describes on its main face, in elegantly worded (and even more elegantly carved) Chinese, the arrival of the bishop “Aluoben” in 635 C.E.—who may not have even been the first Christian missionary to visit the court (Thompson 2009)—and the emperor’s enthusiastic approval of the new religion of *Da Qin*, “from the West” (Malek 2006; Winkler and Tang 2009). Along its sides, the stele evocatively lists, in both Chinese and Syriac, the names of all the Christian bishops of the region for 150 years, from Aluoben to the time of the inscription (figure 0.3; WALKER; Pelliot 1996).¹

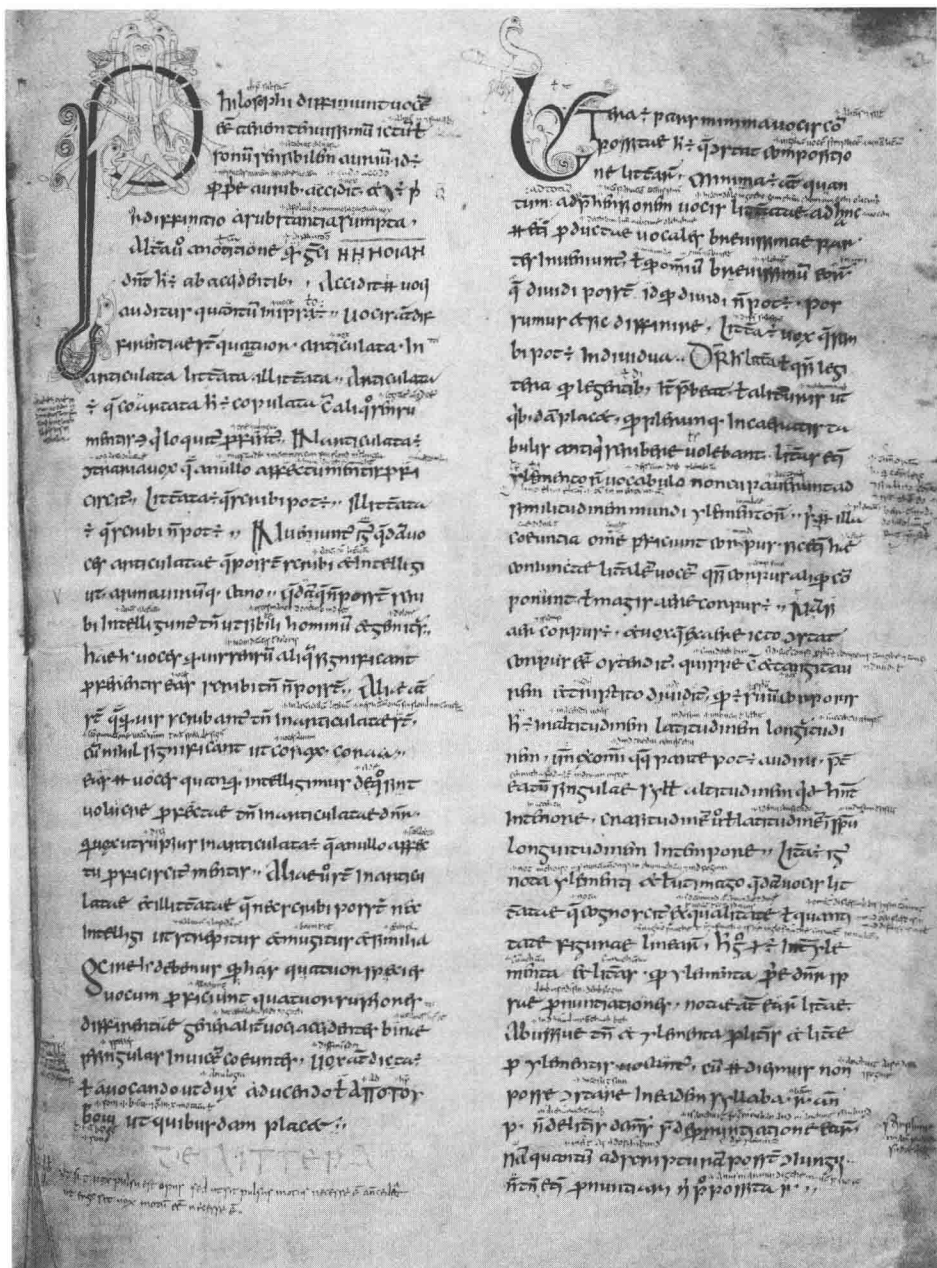


Figure 0.1. Old Irish glosses on Priscian's *Institutiones grammaticae*, 845 C.E. (St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek). See also color plate section.

Both the Old Irish Priscian glosses and the Nestorian Monument fall well outside the purview of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1788), the standard early-modern touchstone for students of Late Antiquity. Gibbon defined his subject (innovatively, including Byzantium) around the

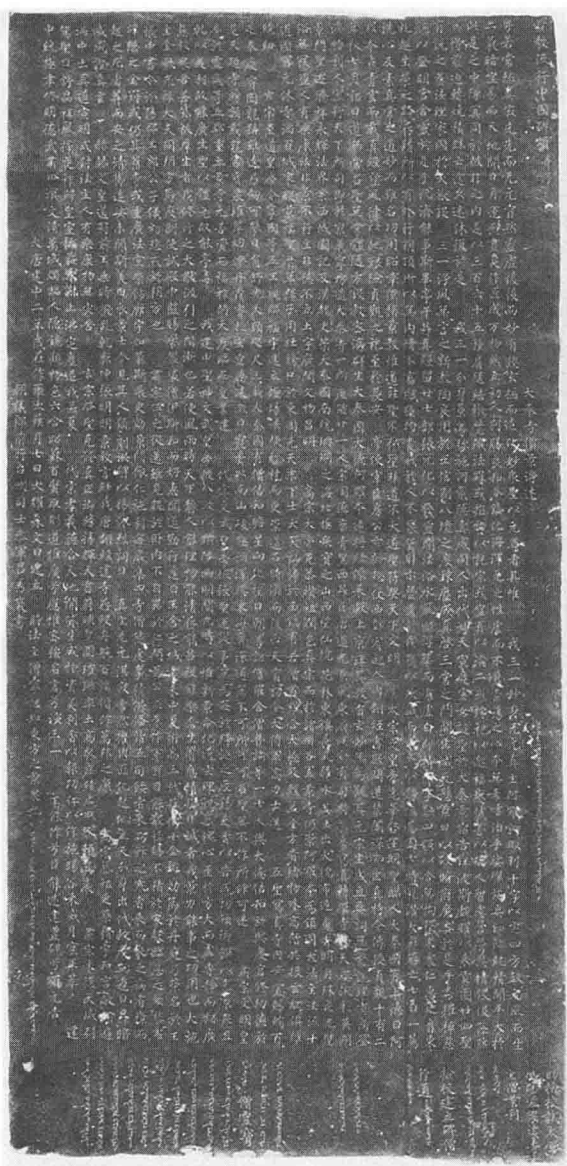


Figure 0.2. The Nestorian Monument in Xi'an, China, 781 C.E. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University).

Mediterranean Sea and, specifically, around the portion of that world under the dominion of the Roman state. This state—from the time of the emperor Constantine (307–337) to the fall of Byzantium in 1453—centered on the eastern imperial capital of Constantinople, the institutional successor to Augustus' Rome, in the middle of an ever-shrinking and, in Gibbon's view, ever-degenerating Byzantine empire. For Gibbon, the bulk of six volumes chronicling the long degeneration of the *Rhomaioi*—"the Romans," as the Byzantines called themselves—further



Figure 0.3. Bilingual Chinese-Syriac list of bishops from the Nestorian Monument in Xi'an, China, 781 c.e. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University).

proved his initial point: ancient civilization never saw a higher point of achievement than at the very beginning of his history, amidst the *pax Romana* of the Antonine emperors in the second century c.e.

Not until the twentieth century was this model substantively problematized, specifically, in the slim book *Mahomet et Charlemagne* by Henri Pirenne (1937), who included the Frankish foundations of Europe and the Islamic caliphate as part of an expansive Mediterranean inquiry. His study focused on the continuity of trade networks and regional identity—subjects hardly touched upon by Gibbon—during the ostensibly cataclysmic events of the sack

and ultimate fall of Rome to the “barbarian” Goths in the fifth century (410 and 476) and the capture of much of the eastern Roman empire by the Arabs (630s). For Pirenne, and contrary to Gibbon, the continuity between antiquity and Late Antiquity during these cataclysms was clear in the West: “Romania” remained a unifying force until Charlemagne, around 800. However, the rise of Islam in the East marked a true break with the Greco-Roman world. Spain and North Africa (not to mention Egypt and Syria), long within the orbit of Rome, now looked east for guidance. Thus, despite Pirenne’s revision of Gibbon—with new questions and new conclusions for the West—the picture of the East was largely the same disaster that Gibbon had chronicled to death. Islam constituted a different world, a foreign culture and religion, with a separate linguistic identity and disruptive patterns of trade and settlement: ultimately, Islam was responsible for the destruction of the Roman Mediterranean. Moreover, in terms of geography, chronology, and subject matter, strictly cultural events like the Old Irish Priscian glosses and the Nestorian Monument were outside the framework of Pirenne’s Mediterranean-centric political and economic argument.

Later in the twentieth century, Peter Brown—soon after a thorough, conservative revision of the late Roman narrative by A. H. M. Jones in *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602: A Social Economic and Administrative Survey* (Jones 1964)—abandoned altogether the related concepts of decline, fall, and catastrophe, and focused instead on cultural history, taking his cue from a new interest in anthropological models, versus the political or economic models still dominant at that time. Brown was a pioneer in this approach, especially in his *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* (Brown 1971), which expanded even Pirenne’s purview by including the lands of the Sasanian Persian empire and by extending the chronology in the East beyond the Islamic conquest. Brown argued for a cultural continuity across the ruptures of the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries, both West and East, pointing to the similarities of expression among Jews, Christians, and Muslims (as well as Zoroastrians and Manichaeans) in the realms of society, religion, and the arts. These vibrant, hitherto undervalued similarities across time, space, and language continue to offer, for Brown and many others, an argument for the unity and uniqueness of the period. Brown’s scholarship thus set a course for the instantiation of Late Antiquity as a category unto its own, and the impact of his approach can be seen throughout the present book.

The examples of the Old Irish Priscian glosses and the Nestorian Monument would therefore slot nicely into Brown’s new way of thinking about the period, though neither fit the specific timeline, nor even the much broadened geographical scope, of his narrative in *The World of Late Antiquity*. In fact, in both cases—the glosses and the Monument—the vibrancy of late antique culture is on display at a historical moment when many still today, even those most devoted to sharpening or expanding Brown’s model, would consider antiquity to be well and truly over. So, why trot them out at the beginning of a volume on Late Antiquity? To underline the fact that the specific boundaries of

our discipline, both chronological and geographical, are still up for debate. While most can agree that these cultural events come near the chronological end of the late antique period—even if early Abbasid Baghdad, around 800, is subsumed under Late Antiquity, for which Brown himself has argued elsewhere (Bowersock, Brown, and Grabar 1999, vii–xiii)—much less often acknowledged is the fact that such extraordinary cultural events as these, drawing directly on the Mediterranean inheritance of antiquity, appear at the extreme West and extreme East of the known world (Ireland and China). Furthermore, in line with Brown’s oft-cited (though unpublished) dictum (“Late Antiquity is always later than you think!”), it could be noted that soon after these two examples the picture of far-flung ancient inheritance came to appear more normal, once cultural groups such as these gained a more permanent seat at the table of recorded world history. Not least was the Icelandic world, which would awaken suddenly in the literary consciousness of the West, producing the pagan heroes of the Old Norse sagas while also converting to Christianity along the way (Strömbäck 1975; Cormack 1994). The East Syriac Christians would eventually meet imperial persecution in China from 845 on, just at the time when the Manichaean Uighurs were losing their empire and suffering persecution themselves (Mackerras 1973). By 1000 C.E., the date when Iceland converted to Christianity en masse, more than 500 East Syriac documents had been translated into Chinese, of which a not inconsiderable number came through the unlikely intermediary of the Turkic Uighur language (Baum and Winkler 2003, 49).

The point of offering this vision of the future-past is that these later worlds, although beyond our scope, nevertheless held a claim, direct or indirect, on the legacy of Late Antiquity. It is surely no coincidence that stubborn ancient divisions, such as the previously unbridgeable gulf between the Mediterranean basin and central China, were already being broken down by East Syriac Christians at the very same time as the death of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632; cf. Shoemaker 2012). In the wake of Brown’s attempt to bring early Islam into the conversation, the precise structural or ideational relationship between Islam and the end of Late Antiquity has proven itself to be a persistent and compelling problem, and one that is still primarily conceived of in religious terms (HOYLAND; Shoemaker 2012). In a monumental series of books, Irfan Shahîd has provocatively tried to link the success of Islam with a preceding non-Islamic Arabization of the Roman Near East (Shahîd 1984a, 1984b, 1989, 1995–2009). That may explain (for some) the Islamic Arab conquest of the Levant (cf. ROBIN and Millar 2009), but what about Central Asia, North Africa, or southern Spain? Presumably, these were very different societies without the least hint of prior Arabi(c)ization (for North Africa, see Kaegi 2010). The solution to this problem largely rests in fields that still need to be tilled: recent research, including groundbreaking chapters in this book, make it clear that, from the sixth to eighth centuries, the interstitial regions between the West, the Middle East, and the Far East became crucially important. Because these regions—namely, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Danube, Spain, North Africa, and, not least, Asia Minor—all

emerge as vibrant microcosms of their own in the medieval period, built directly upon the foundation of Late Antiquity, the transitional period of, roughly, 500 to 800 C.E. now appears more important than previously recognized for defining what Late Antiquity as a whole was really about.

Of course, these regions had all been important before at various times during the preceding millennium, though principally as breadbaskets for their contemporary overlords, be they Greeks, Romans, Persians, or Huns. In Late Antiquity, however, these regions changed into essential spaces for the movement of ideas and the creative interaction of religion, people, and goods. They became places where it was possible, even encouraged, to break down barriers and structures, within the frameworks of the ancient Persian, Greek, and Roman empires (INGLEBERT; HALDON; Fisher 2011). Trading groups such as the Sogdians rose to prominence as cultural enablers for exchange (DE LA VAISSIÈRE), adopting the Syriac Estrangelo script for their prolific east-Iranian lingua franca (Dresden 1983). The detritus of Heraclius' wars with the Sasanians (622–630), on both sides of the fight, as well as the squabbling of the Christian Mediterranean majorities within the empire, were factors that offered in the seventh century a structurally weak resistance to the Arab armies (Howard-Johnston 1999; 2010). However, that same structural weakness was productive of creative possibilities hitherto unknown. It was a fortuitous calamity that could provoke the flourishing of Hellenistic-Umayyad art at Qusayr 'Amra (Fowden 2004) or the development of an "obsessive taxonomy" of late antique philosophy (SMITH) that proceeded hand in hand with changes to Greco-Roman secular education (WATTS) and (equally so) early Christian education (RUBENSON). On the central Asian side, the cultural and political situation of Late Antiquity provided fodder for the continued expansion of Manichaeism and Buddhism (Tardieu 1988); on the western European side, Late Antiquity formed the basis of the legal, ecclesiastical, and cultural achievements of the Carolingians (McKitterick 1989).

Recent, magisterial contributions to the question of what happened over time to the infrastructure of Late Antiquity have centered on trade, commerce, and the role of production (McCormick 2001; Wickham 2005; Shaw 2008). The *OHLA* does not eschew debates about economic structures (e.g., BANAJI), but a book such as this is arguably not the best venue to survey archaeological reports or present the results of complicated scientific analyses. Different approaches have been required, such as exploring what the agrarian experience was like in Late Antiquity (GREY), examining the institutional and legal bonds of cohesive families and communities (HARPER; HARRIES), and elucidating the manifold connections between identity formation and legal status (MAAS; MATHISEN; UHALDE). Rather than isolating archaeology or economic theory from the day-to-day lives of late antique individuals by generalizing across the board, the chapters of the *OHLA* show a willingness to experiment with new combinations of evidence and theory in an attempt to understand the smallest moving parts of Late Antiquity.

At the same time, this book is not a “history of late antique private life” or a “people’s history of Late Antiquity,” even while such a book remains a *desideratum* (cf. Patlagean 1977; Ariès and Duby 1987, vol. 1; Burrus 2005; Krueger 2006). Instead, elite categories have a prominent place—poetry, philosophy, art, architecture, and theology all play their part—though these subjects often appear in different roles from what the word *elite* traditionally suggests (adumbrated by Averil Cameron 1981, §1; Brown 2000). The relationship of the viewer or venerator of a late antique icon to the wealth of associations (social, intellectual, religious) conjured therein, or by the icon’s setting, is complex, and this complexity speaks in microcosm to universally relevant engagements between humans and the natural and supernatural worlds (PEERS).

Nevertheless, the uniqueness of the late antique experience is taken up from a number of perspectives: from the designation of certain lands, sites, or buildings as newly holy (YASIN; S. JOHNSON); to the dynamic (i.e., nonepigonial) quality of late antique poetry in its relationship to earlier models (AGOSTI; MCGILL); to the robust tradition of historiography that set a precedent for all subsequent medieval historians, both East and West (CROKE); to the prominence of seminal themes—such as the seemingly antithetical topics of apocalyptic (GURAN) and the late Latin miscellany (CELENZA)—in the reception of Late Antiquity as an identifiable period among premodern societies.

Critical to any formulation of Late Antiquity’s uniqueness is its role as the chronological container for the initial process of self-definition within Christianity: during this period, both the Semitic and Hellenistic primal elements of the religion were vying for attention and qualifying their relationship to one another (WOOD; A. JOHNSON). Yet, during Late Antiquity this competition was asymmetrical, since Hellenism was equally the patrimony of late paganism, and thus Hellenophile Christianity had to vie with insiders as well as outsiders (SMITH; Bowersock 1990; Chuvín 2009; Alan Cameron 2011). This cultural and linguistic competition does not seem to have been as strained before Late Antiquity—witness the easy intercourse between Christian bilingual (Syriac and Greek) scholars at Edessa around 200 C.E., such as Bardaisan and his school (Drijvers 1984, §1)—and it does not seem to have been so at the end of Late Antiquity either, when the “assimilation” of Greek linguistic superiority was assured among Syriac philosophers and translators (Brock 1984, §5; Ruzer and Kofsky 2010). Thus the intense competition over (and against) Christian origins—among Latin writers as well (Courcelle 1969; Maas 2003; Humphries and Gwynn 2010)—remains one of the most compelling reasons to view Late Antiquity as a definable period and a unique field of study unto its own.

Several other topics that could be considered definitive of Late Antiquity take center stage in the *OHLA*. There is, for instance, the emergence of the hospital as a locus for the growing societal concern about health, disease, and the duty of the Christian state toward the sick (HORDEN). The religious fluidity of the period seems today to have produced more cultural innovation than it did anxiety, especially once the old-guard “pagan reaction” is balanced by the evidence of a

much more gradual process of Christianization in the fourth to sixth centuries (MAXWELL; Alan Cameron 2011; cf. Dodds 1965). Riding the incoming tide of Christianization was the office of the bishop, which, although prominent in the Church from the early second century on, took on an expanded societal role within and above the curial structure of the late Roman city (GWYNN). Of course, aside from all the lasting local change a bishop or patriarch could effect, his contribution to the ecumenical doctrines of the Church was what garnered him special blessings or *damnatio memoriae* among subsequent generations. None of the so-called heresiarchs of Late Antiquity (Origen, Arius, Apollinarius, Priscillian, Pelagius, Nestorius, Eutyches, et al.) could possibly compete with forged documents (WESSEL). Such forgeries were used by all sides throughout Late Antiquity, and this habit set a precedent for later, more infamous forgeries, such as in the *Donation of Constantine* about 800 C.E. (Bowersock 2007). While admittedly a case study of the process of conciliar theology, forgery nonetheless speaks precisely to the unprecedented value that Christian creeds and anathemas held in late antique society as a whole.

Connected to the promulgation of correct belief in Late Antiquity was the conversion of indigenous people groups at the margins of the empire. The western kingdoms that arose in the fourth century, eventually supplanting the Roman empire in the later fifth, often took sides in the doctrinal debates as a means of distinguishing themselves from one another (O'Donnell 2008, chapter 1). Political savvy such as this cannot legitimately be labeled “barbarian” by any standard and especially since the kingdoms found success on exactly the same playing field—that is, the dense network of city, town, and countryside—that their late Roman counterparts had known in the fourth century (KULIKOWSKI). The subjects of violence and rupture in Late Antiquity are perennially important to studies of the western theater and have resonance in the questions of self-definition and collapse that recur throughout the *OHLA* (MAAS; MATHISEN; MAXWELL; UHALDE; Kelly 2009). Even while the debate over violence in Late Antiquity is evolving, scholars have already produced stimulating treatments that attempt to take in the Christian East and Islam as well (Drake 2006; Watts 2010; Sizgorich 2009). A notable area of exciting work is Greco-Coptic Egypt, where the dichotomy between the upper Nile (with its intractable pagans, Jews, and Christians) and a Mediterranean-savvy Alexandria often breaks down upon close inspection (BOUD'HORS; PAPACONSTANTINO). Egypt was a cohesive yet very complex region in Late Antiquity, and the massive corpus of surviving Coptic literature is only now receiving the devoted care it deserves (e.g., Emmel 2004). Likewise, the cache of late antique papyri from Egypt continues to grow and continues, proportionally, to affect our understanding of the everyday social, pedagogical, and religious practices of eastern Late Antiquity (Bagnall 2009; 2011; Luijendijk 2008; MacCoull 2009).

On the subject of pedagogy, there is, of course, an argument to be made for the applicability of the modern handbook genre to the study of Late Antiquity. While the late antique world in this book offers the reader a remarkable number

of diverse topics and locales—stretching widely from central Asia in the east, to Ethiopia in the south, to Spain and Ireland in the west, and to Scandinavia in the north—the period can, nevertheless, be recognizably depicted as an era of centralization, consolidation, and compilation (Inglebert 2001; Vessey 2003). On the surface, this view may seem to privilege intellectual or political history, but the metaphor of consolidation can speak equally well of ruptures and transitions in society, politics, economy, religion, architecture, and so on. To buttress such an image of consolidation, one might want to add the quick corollary that, despite the geographical expanse of the period, the Mediterranean Sea was an established, even primal, point of centralization around which late antique microcosms participated in a shared ecology, both physical and metaphorical (Horden and Purcell 2000). Is there a way to talk about the smallest moving parts of Late Antiquity without losing track of unifying metaphors that make the period comprehensible to fellow historians within and outside the field?

The *OHLA* attempts to stretch the possibilities of unifying metaphors while also questioning the value of overused systematic frameworks. Thus, it assumes from the beginning the inherited necessity of problematizing chronological norms, no matter whether the “catastrophist” or the “long” Late Antiquity should arrive closer to the truth (Marcone 2008; James 2008; Ando 2008; Ward-Perkins 2005; Averil Cameron 2002). Quite apart from one’s answer to the question of when the ancient world ended, the problematization itself is valuable and contributes substantially to the field, particularly when so many authors from differing professional backgrounds tackle the question in the same book. This book does not accept any single chronological span as necessarily authoritative, though I as editor provisionally offered “Constantine to Muhammad” to the authors (cf. INGLEBERT). Of course, in the end, almost none of the authors subscribe to this exact span, extending it earlier and later as their arguments require. It is important that few, if any, authors in the *OHLA* consider this span too long.

On the other hand, what the *OHLA* does not accept as negotiable is the geographic breadth of the subject, as already mentioned. If there is a notional center to this diversity, it is the rigorous insistence on geographical frameworks that do not privilege the borders of the late Roman and early Byzantine empires. The authors in the *OHLA* certainly do, from time to time, accept political borders for the examination of unifying structures, namely, military or bureaucratic (GILLET; HALDON), but the intra-Roman narrative of Gibbon has largely been abandoned in every quarter of the field, even among those whose focus is the boundaries of these empires themselves (Millar 1993; 2006; Isaac 2000; Dignas and Winter 2007; Stephenson 2000). Of course, boundaries are more than political, and, for the sake of expert analysis, traditions, languages, and regions have been parceled out to specialists in these subjects. This has resulted in *cur-sus academicae* from across the spectrum: plenty of authors in the *OHLA* may not even self-identify as “late antiquists,” a fact that testifies to the broad appeal of the subject and the expert work being done in numerous adjacent fields.

On this basis, the geography covered here could come as something of a surprise to readers from outside the academic practice of Late Antiquity, particularly, readers from neighboring disciplines such as Classics, Medieval/Byzantine Studies, Renaissance Studies, and other fields that have (a traditional) Late Antiquity as part of their patrimony. To be specific, when compared to previous scholarship, the center of Late Antiquity in this book has demonstrably shifted toward the east and the north, to the degree that the loci of the (formerly Mediterranean-shaped) ellipse are now Seleucia-Ctesiphon (WALKER) in the East—or dare we say Sogdiana? (DE LA VAISSIÈRE)—and the Danube Valley (CALDWELL) in the West. Some readers might think that this is Late Antiquity askew, having moved disproportionately along two different axes. While there is still certainly an *oikoumene*, there is no recognizable *mare nostrum*. In recent years, scholars have considered the value of the Mediterranean—so well studied, since Fernand Braudel at least, as a living phenomenon—as a cipher for other “oikoumenical” regions of the world, but this is ultimately an analogical approach to the problem, even if a “Saharan Mediterranean Desert” could perhaps mean something concrete (Abulafia 2005). Intriguingly, the real-world bodies of water central to the *OHLA* are rivers instead of seas: the Euphrates-Tigris and the Danube were, at various times during Late Antiquity, definitive of imperial boundaries, yet, at other times, they were innocuously well inside or well outside the Roman empire. Ultimately, the status of these rivers as boundary markers between peoples and states, for a limited amount of time in any case, was less significant in the *longue durée* than the innumerable transactions (cultural, linguistic, economic, and otherwise) that took place across or around them.

For both its geographical and chronological spans, the *OHLA* is surprisingly synoptic and synchronic, especially given that Late Antiquity, as a field of study, has so often been defined by debates over the breadth and length of the subject. Thus, recent studies such as Deborah Deliyannis's *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (2010) and Giusto Traina's *428 AD: An Ordinary Year at the End of the Roman Empire* (2009) resonate with the approaches taken in the *OHLA* because each is a circumscribed topic, geographical or temporal, though with universal relevance for Late Antiquity. Both of these examples generally eschew atomism yet will universalize or theorize only on the basis of close reading. In the *OHLA*, diachrony prominently appears in surveys of specific categories (e.g., BOUD'HORS; ROBIN), but the analysis of individual problems and texts often precedes and directs the diachronic surveys.

It has recently been observed in a review essay for the inaugural volume of the *Classical Receptions Journal* that general collected volumes appear now to be the standard scholarly venue to discuss the methodological remit of Reception Studies as a discipline (Güthenke 2009, 104). The essay quotes the following summary from a volume in that field:

In place of the comforting illusion that even if times change antiquity no longer does, comparison of histories of scholarship or any series of studies around a single object reminds us of just the opposite illusion (or is it a fact?),