



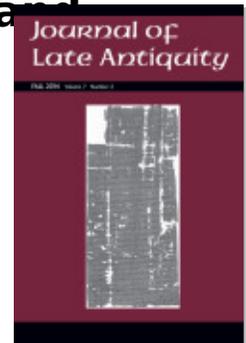
PROJECT MUSE®

**Handbook of Jewish Literature from Late Antiquity,
135-700 CE by Eyal Ben-Eliyahu, Yehudah Cohn, and
Fergus Millar (review)**

Ra'anān Boustān, Henry Gruber

Journal of Late Antiquity, Volume 7, Number 2, Fall 2014, pp. 360-362
(Review)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/jla.2014.0025



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jla/summary/v007/7.2.boustan.html>

Book Reviews

Presses are encouraged to submit books dealing with Late Antiquity for consideration for review to any of JLA's three Book Review Editors: Michael Kulikowski (mek31@psu.edu); Hagith Sivan (helenasivan@yahoo.com); and Dennis Trout (troutd@missouri.edu).

Handbook of Jewish Literature from Late Antiquity, 135–700 CE

EYAL BEN-ELIYAHU, YEHUDAH COHN, and FERGUS MILLAR

Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2012. Pp. xxv + 162. ISBN 0197265227.

Reviewed by Ra'anan Boustan
and Henry Gruber
(University of California, Los Angeles)

This accessible and well-structured handbook aims to guide the classically trained historian through the wealth of Jewish literature from Late Antiquity that scholars working primarily in Greek and Latin often overlook. The *Handbook* was designed to serve as a companion to the volume of state-of-the-field essays that emerged from a conference held at the British Academy in 2008 on “Rabbinic Texts and the History of Late-Roman Palestine.” The origins in the British Academy conference are still visible in its overriding emphasis on rabbinic literature. This is unfortunate because, while the book presents itself as a comprehensive guide to the full range of sources produced by and for Jews in the period from 135–700 CE, it largely neglects the abundant materials that elucidate Jewish life in Late Antiquity outside the orbit of the rabbinic movement.

The *Handbook* is divided into three main sections: prefatory materials, a historical introduction, and eight thematically organized body chapters. The third section, which forms the book's core, details the range of surviving Jewish literary materials from Late Antiquity and the available scholarly resources for accessing them. The book concludes with a rather sparse two-page subject index.

In a foreword, the distinguished scholar of ancient Judaism, Philip Alexander, frames the book as a less specialist alternative to Gunter Stemberger's still fundamental *Introduction to the Talmud and Mishnah* (Edinburgh, 1996). The prefatory section also provides a handy guide to the online collections of text-editions, manuscripts, reference works, and bibliographies currently available to scholars interested in Jewish literature from late antiquity. This section is capped by a convenient glossary of Hebrew and Aramaic technical terms that would otherwise puzzle the intended reader.

The introduction lays out the historical contexts within which the major works of late antique Jewish literature were produced. This literature was composed in Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic and derives almost exclusively from Roman Palestine and Sasanian Iraq. The authors observe the curious fact that the Jewish communities of the western Mediterranean did not produce an indigenous literature—or, if they did, it was not transmitted through recognizably Jewish channels. Moreover, the rabbis, for their part, studiously avoided Greek genres and forms, such as biography or historical writing, despite the high degree of Hellenization within rabbinic circles. Thus, virtually no Jewish work in Greek, from either Palestine or the Diaspora, survives from Late

Antiquity. The authors speculate that this lacuna resulted from a conscious decision on the part of Jewish scholars and writers to avoid Greek language and forms precisely in the period that saw the rapprochement between Christianity and the Roman Empire—and with it the successful absorption of much of the “pagan” classical tradition within Christian literary culture. The authors treat in more cursory fashion the less well documented and still poorly understood contexts of Jewish literary production in the Sasanian Empire, perhaps missing an opportunity to capture adequately the recent and exciting advances in this wing of the field.

In addition, the authors note that rabbinic literature does not survive in manuscripts from Late Antiquity but is mediated almost exclusively through the scribal activity of medieval copyists, thereby raising the specter of pervasive anachronism. But, pointing to what they view as positive inscriptional evidence for rabbinic activity and authority as well as the historically accurate use of place names in rabbinic sources, they argue that rabbinic literature does indeed date from and reflect the social and political realities of the late antique world. The authors leave open the question of whether these sources originally took a written or oral form. While brief mention is made of the distinctive formal conventions of rabbinic writings, the *Handbook* does not aim to provide sustained guidance regarding the interpretative challenges presented by this literature. Rather, the user must—and should—consult one of the available introductions to the idiosyncrasies of the rabbinic corpus (e.g., Alexander Samely *Forms of Rabbinic Literature and Thought* [Oxford, 2007]).

The *Handbook* is structured around the principal categories into which late antique Jewish literature is traditionally divided. Chapters 2–9 present, respectively, talmudic texts, midrashic texts, mystical and magical sources, targumic literature, liturgical texts, historiography, apocalyptic, and contemporary sources from Late Antiquity such as inscriptions and amulets. Each chapter is further divided into subsections addressing the date, provenance, language, authorship, and textual transmission of individual works. The authors discuss the formal peculiarities of each work as well as the other texts with which it stands in dialogue. In addition to listing the major manuscripts, printed editions, translations, and commentaries for each work, the *Handbook* also provides a select bibliography of secondary scholarship.

As noted above, the authors restrict the *Handbook* almost exclusively to Jewish literatures in Hebrew and Aramaic on the grounds that Jews either did not compose or did not transmit literature in Greek or Latin during Late Antiquity. They are aware that some texts are considered by scholars to have been created in originally Jewish contexts, even if their preservation owes itself to Christian transmission. Thus, the chapter on liturgical texts (chap. 6) includes a section on a collection of prayers in Greek that appears to stem from the Jewish synagogue but was preserved in the fourth-century Christian *Apostolic Constitutions*. It is, therefore, surprising that the *Handbook* lacks comparable materials found in other late antique corpora. Thus, for example, the chapter on mystical and magical literatures (chap. 4) might have included the possibly Jewish materials that were transmitted within the corpus of the Greek Magical Papyri, such

as the *Eighth Book of Moses* (in Leiden Papyrus J 395), as well as works like the *Testament of Solomon* that appear to have been in circulation among both Jews and Christians. While the methods for determining the “Jewishness” of such materials remain contested and the religious identities of these texts are uncertain and complex, the reader would have gained a much broader sense of the literary culture in which Jews likely participated.

This minimalist approach to the scope of late antique Jewish literature is even more striking when it comes to inscriptional and documentary materials (chap. 9). The only sources discussed here are in Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic and primarily from Palestine, despite the mass of inscriptions from other parts of the Mediterranean in Greek and even Latin that are unquestionably Jewish. Thus, we gain valuable information about inscribed materials from Palestinian synagogues, from the necropolis of Beth Shearim, and in magical amulets and bowls from Palestine and Babylonia, but not a word about the vast and varied inscriptional sources from the Mediterranean diaspora, such as the catacombs of Rome, the synagogues of Asia Minor, or the tombstones of North Africa and the Balearic Islands. The criterion for inclusion seems to have been language (i.e., Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic) and not “Jewishness.” Far from providing a comprehensive portrait of the textual resources for studying Jewish life in Late Antiquity writ large, this chapter restricts itself to those materials that supplement our knowledge of rabbinic literature from Palestine and Babylonia. It is precisely because the *Handbook* has unquestionable value to ancient historians that we hope that future editions will do more to challenge the traditional boundaries that

have segregated rabbinic literary production from its wider cultural environment, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

*The Roman West, AD 200–500:
An Archaeological Study*

Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. 547. ISBN 978-0-5211-9649-9.

SIMON ESMONDE CLEARY

Reviewed by A. H. Merrills
(University of Leicester)

This is an important and thought-provoking study. Given all that this book is, it may seem strange to begin a review by emphasizing what it is not, but recent historiography and the somewhat stark title may make some clarification helpful. First, it should be stressed at once that this is not a general, synthetic examination of “The end of the Western Roman Empire” (or “The Birth of Medieval Europe”), of the kind that has become so familiar over the last decade or two. *The Roman West* could be viewed in these terms, to be sure, and it is likely that it will be much read in coming years as an accessible introduction to the archaeology of a period better known for its textual narratives. Yet the greatest contribution of the book is to establish the distinctiveness of the later Roman period in its material culture, rather than to add to the clash of grand historiographical narratives. This is a study and celebration of what is distinctive about the period from 200 to 500 CE, of the triumph of new urban forms, the militarization of political life, the growth of the church, the creation of regional economic networks, and the articulation of new forms of aristocratic display. It is not a simple story of how the hypertrophic classicism of the high empire turned into the emerging regional polities of the