
Centers and Peripheries?

I have an admission: when I first started attending the monthly seminar organized by Peter Brown through the Group for the Study of Late Antiquity at Princeton in the 1990s, I did not know who Ambrose of Milan was.¹ That confession is perhaps particularly embarrassing for someone who has just assumed the editorship of a journal dedicated to the study of Late Antiquity. Although it is not a terribly good excuse, I was at the time a first-year graduate student in the Department of Religion primarily interested in Jewish literature and culture in what we then blithely called the “Graeco-Roman world” and was more knowledgeable about the history of the Hasmonaean dynasty than about post-Constantinian Christianity. One of the most memorable seminars I attended in those years was given by Neil McLynn (then of Keio University, now of Corpus Christi College Oxford).² Among various topics related to the theme of “Imperial Churchgoing from Constantine to Theodosius,” McLynn treated us to a brilliant assessment of the drama that played out at Milan in 388 CE between the city’s bishop Ambrose and Emperor Theodosius I. The confrontation stemmed from the emperor’s order that the Christians who had destroyed a synagogue in the city of Callinicum on the Euphrates be punished as criminals, the Jewish victims compensated, and the bishop of the city bear the cost of rebuilding the structure.³

1. On the history of Princeton’s Group for the Study of Late Antiquity, which was led for many years by Peter Brown and which has been transformed since his retirement into the Committee for the Study of Late Antiquity, see the CSLA website: <https://csla.princeton.edu/>

2. According to the Event Archive on the CSLA website, McLynn’s seminar was held on October 15, 2000: <https://csla.princeton.edu/events/event-archive>

3. For his earlier treatment of the episode, see Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 298–315; and, in the

I recall that two realizations dawned on me that day during the seminar, neither of which might have been terribly novel to many of my fellow attendees, but were momentous for me. First was my sheer astonishment—as a budding student of late ancient Judaism, with its fluid and nearly impossible to date texts—at the existence of an actual *transcript* of the sermon regarding the “Callinicum Affair” that Ambrose delivered before Theodosius and his entourage (even if it was later arranged by the bishop himself).⁴ Second and more profound was my recognition that the field of Late Antiquity, with its sophisticated approach to the dynamics of historical transformation, might present an especially fruitful intellectual framework within which to pursue my long-standing interest in Jewish participation in and resistance to the hegemonic cultural, religious, and social forms of the ancient Mediterranean world.

Over the subsequent two decades, I, along with an increasing number of scholars of ancient Judaism, have found the field of Late Antiquity a congenial home.⁵ In the process, the study of Jews and Judaism has expanded the boundaries of the field, while also establishing itself as one of its essential facets. This development seemed to be a natural outgrowth of the many and varied peripheries that the field of Late Antiquity was ready—even designed—to embrace.

My experience within the loose and shifting circle of scholars and students who came together monthly for Peter Brown’s seminar primed me for the next steps in my career. Within a couple years of leaving Princeton, I found myself in the equally hospitable community of scholars of Late Antiquity that extended across the University of California system. This group, which has since become the California Consortium for Late Antiquity, had its roots in the University of California Multi-campus Research Group (MRG) on the History and Culture of Late Antiquity, which was established in 1999 with

context of the historical experience of the Jews in the Mediterranean diaspora, see now Ross Shepard Kraemer, *The Mediterranean Diaspora in Late Antiquity: What Christianity Cost the Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 132–36.

4. See McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 305.

5. Among the many signs of the successful interpenetration between the study of ancient Judaism and the field of Late Antiquity, I would single out here a couple of outstanding examples: the sustained editorial collaboration by Daniel Boyarin, Virginia Burrus, and Derek Krueger on the University of Pennsylvania Press series *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion* (<https://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/series/DIV.html>) and the recently established Master’s Program in Religion in Late Antiquity at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, with its especially deep bench of specialists in the histories and literatures of the varied religious communities of late antique Palestine (<http://orion.mscc.huji.ac.il/orion/hu.shtml#religion>).

funds from the UC President's Office.⁶ The original members of the MRG (Emily Albu, Hal Drake, Susanna Elm, Michele Salzman, and the initiative's PI, Claudia Rapp) formed one node in what by the late 1990s was an international community of specialists in the study of Late Antiquity. If California could at times feel far away from places like Princeton, Oxford, Paris, and Vienna, it felt like a vital channel for the flow of scholars and scholarship connecting the traditional Atlantic-oriented hubs of the field to Pacific-rim centers in East Asia, Australia, and New Zealand.

Meanwhile, the Transformations in the Classical Heritage series, established at UC Press by Peter Brown during his tenure in the 1980s on the Berkeley faculty, has remained throughout an international magnet for some of the best Anglophone scholarship in the field.⁷ And more recently, under the wise editorial guidance of Eric Schmidt, the Press has increasingly become a significant publisher of books dedicated to bringing the study of ancient Judaism into deep and sustained dialogue with the wider field of Late Antiquity.⁸

From my vantage point on the west coast, Late Antiquity had become a truly "global field" in two quite distinct senses of the term. Certainly, the period was now studied by scholars trained and working around the world, often in academic positions specially established for that purpose. But the field, which was in many respects an intentional blurring of the boundaries between late Roman history and the history of Christianity, had also gradually begun to fulfill its early ambition to encompass cities, regions, and even empires as well as linguistic, religious, and ethnic communities that lay outside the immediate orbit of the "classical" Mediterranean world. Such shifts east and south, as it were, and beyond the limits of the Latin and Greek textual canons have meant that, increasingly, scholars (like me) who work on late ancient texts in Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic or on Jewish material culture in late antique Palestine can reasonably fancy their interests no less

6. For information on this group, see: <https://late-antiquity.ihc.ucsb.edu/>

7. For a list of books published in the series, including by several members of the MRG, see: <https://www.ucpress.edu/series/tch/transformation-of-the-classical-heritage>

8. Notable recent examples include: Mika Ahuvia, *On My Right Michael, On My Left Gabriel: Angels in Ancient Jewish Culture* (Oakland: University of California Press, forthcoming 2021); Eyal Ben-Eliyahu, *Identity and Territory: Jewish Perceptions of Space in Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019); Ari Finkelstein, *The Specter of the Jews: Emperor Julian and the Rhetoric of Ethnicity in Syrian Antioch* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Mira Balberg, *Blood for Thought: The Reinvention of Sacrifice in Early Rabbinic Literature* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

“central” to the field than its more traditional sources or topics. If, in fact, the locution “center” has real meaning anymore.

It is precisely because of my own happy experience as student, teacher, and researcher within the field of Late Antiquity that I am particularly excited to have assumed the position of co-Editor-in-Chief at *Studies in Late Antiquity* (*SLA*). The journal was founded with the express aim of further expanding the scope of the field, while also reflecting the ongoing advances in the analytical methods, data sources, and theoretical concerns of its practitioners. In my new editorial role, I join forces, at least for a time, with the founding Editor-in-Chief of *SLA*, Beth Digeser, whose visionary commitment to a truly “global Late Antiquity” has already been beautifully realized in the first four volumes of the journal. In both her editorial essays and her editorial decisions, Beth has worked to challenge preconceived notions of what the centers and peripheries of the field are—or should be. Moreover, I am eager to work with Beth to ensure that *SLA* remains committed to the conviction that first-rate research is not only compatible with, but is also enhanced by the creation of a scholarly community that is diverse and inclusive, especially for those who have historically been marginalized by the institutional structures of the academy. Having recently returned to Princeton as a Research Scholar in Judaic Studies, I myself feel enormously privileged to be part of an undertaking that so effectively bridges the various academic worlds I have occupied over the past two decades as well as the varied intellectual concerns that have occupied me.

The articles and essays in the current issue of *SLA* skillfully demonstrate how disciplined shifts in perspective—from centers to peripheries and back again—can illuminate both long-standing historical problems and glaring lacunae in scholarship. Jeremiah Coogan’s “Transforming Textuality: Porphyry, Eusebius, and Late Ancient Tables of Contents” reveals just how vital a role tables of contents played in structuring textual knowledge, especially within the types of composite or collected works that were so characteristic of late antique literary production. Far from being peripheral to the projects of Porphyry and Eusebius, tables of contents proved to be powerful paratexts that exemplified the sophisticated strategies that these authors employed for guiding the reader’s experience through the inherited textual materials they had assembled. In a similar fashion, John Kee’s “Writing Edessa into the Roman Empire” shows that a seemingly remote city like Edessa, on the Roman–Persian frontier, can shed light on the complex interactions among civic, regional, and imperial identities throughout the Roman Empire of Late

Antiquity. Local particularity and imperial belonging did not negate each other, but worked in concert to generate the highly distinctive forms of communal identity that were emblematic of the world of Late Antiquity. In their article “A Roman Military Prison at Lambaesis,” which identifies the structure immediately beneath a temple at the heart of the Roman legionary fortress at Lambaesis (modern Algeria) as a military prison, Mark Letteney and Matthew Larsen call attention to the uncanny proximity between the spaces of the marginalized and of the dominant. They suggest that not only were carceral spaces ubiquitous throughout the ancient Mediterranean, but they were also central to the practices of surveillance and social control through which the Roman military and other imperial and civic institutions exerted power.

Letteney and Larsen also perform the invaluable service of reminding us not to dismiss too summarily modern categories like the prison. Carceral spaces have long been hiding in plain sight within the material and textual records. A willingness to see them need not entail the imposition of modern ideologies of incarceration on the ancient world. But Letteney and Larsen remind us that to overlook their existence is to obscure the operation of this basic practice of social control within the Roman Empire. In a similar vein, David Frankfurter and the other contributors of this issue’s Viewpoint Essays (Nicola Denzey Lewis, Georgia Frank, Lucy Grig, and William Klingshirn) argue for the selective resuscitation of models and approaches that have fallen out of favor among scholars of ancient religion over the past few decades. They propose that, in the right hands and with appropriate care, some of these analytical tools might enable us to return to long-standing and often intractable questions or problems with fresh eyes. Here, too, we can catch sight of the ceaseless movement of ideas, people, and things that both defines and effaces distinctions between centers and peripheries. ■