
Keep Late Antiquity Weird

As historical periods go, Late Antiquity is neither fish nor fowl. Straddled by epochs with broadly recognizable attributes (city states and temples! kingdoms and churches!), Late Antiquity escapes easy definition. Scholars continue to debate the period's most essential elements, from when it began (the third century?) to when it ended (the seventh century?) to whether its most salient features were religious (the rise of Christianity, rabbinic Judaism, and Islam?) or political (the fragmentation of the empire, its coalescence around Constantinople, and the emergence of post-Roman kingdoms?). In fact, we cannot even agree on whether Late Antiquity stands as epilogue (as the period's name suggests) or prologue, whether it was an epoch of decline or a period of transformation.

For me, and I suspect for most readers of *Studies in Late Antiquity*, the fact that Late Antiquity troubles its own periodization is precisely why we study it. Its indeterminacy invites a staggering range of scholarly approaches, some highly traditional (e.g., philology, positivist textual analysis, archaeology), others more cutting edge (e.g., feminist theory, digital humanities, and palaeoscience). Moreover, the vast geographic and cultural expanse of the late Roman empire and its manifold connectivity with regions to the north, south, and east mean that Late Antiquity generated an exceptionally heterogeneous, polyglot archive. (I can think of few other fields where my knowing only *two* historical languages is considered something of a scholarly deficit.) Simply put, ours is an epoch that invites, indeed necessitates, interdisciplinarity, collegiality, and boundary breaking. Staying in our silos will simply not do.

The genius of *Studies of Late Antiquity*, and the primary reason why I am thrilled to join the editorial team, is its embrace of Late Antiquity's manifold eccentricities. *SLA* encourages scholarship that pushes readers outside

familiar interpretive zones, whether through the study of people, regions, and sources external to a Mediterranean-centered Roman empire; the promotion of scholarly viewpoints from beyond the Anglo-European academic diaspora; the generation of unexpected, counterintuitive historical narratives; or the application of methods not typically used in the study of Late Antiquity. As someone who has spent her career working among different disciplines and forms of evidence (history and religious studies; classics and early medieval studies; texts, material culture, and now natural scientific data), I am hugely excited and deeply honored to be stepping into the role of editor-in-chief of a journal that celebrates the breaching of boundaries. Under the formative guidance of my predecessor, founder and editor-in-chief *emerita* Elizabeth Digeser, current editor-in-chief Raʿanan Boustan, and a group of fantastically activist associate editors (Emily Albu, Hal Drake, Susanna Elm, Michele Salzman, Ed Watts, and Ann Marie Yasin), *SLA* has become our field's premier journal for scholarly risk-taking. As the most recent custodian of their distinctly Californian vision (the state that proudly invented "weird"), I hope to build on *SLA*'s strengths, including its established dedication to promoting gender equity in the field, and to press further for other forms of diversity as well as new trends of scholarly exploration.

There is, of course, always more work to be done in actualizing the journal's mission to pursue a truly global Late Antiquity. We have yet to publish articles, for example, about Mayan society during (its) Classical period (250–900 CE) or by scholars writing from East Asian institutions. Many of our authors have focused on a relatively narrow body of textual evidence, even if they devised more radical ways to read it. True interdisciplinarity, I think, remains more aspirational than realized. Moving forward, I will work alongside my colleague Raʿanan Boustan to search for more ways to rethink and rewrite our field.

The first essay in this volume exemplifies the journal's dedicated engagement with a more expansive, decentered Late Antiquity. Matthew J. Chalmers opens the issue with a heuristic challenge: to consider how our field's preoccupation with disaster shapes our scholarly engagement with "peripheral" late ancient communities, such as the Samaritans. Disaster, he observes in "The Rise and Fall of Peripheral Peoples? Samaritans and the Discourse of Late Antiquity Disaster," is not simply an objective event that *happens to* our historical actors and inevitably leads to their disempowerment, marginalization, or erasure. Disaster, he argues, is a powerful historiographical discourse that "evaluates, orders, and scripts narratives" (p. 218). With this

critical insight in hand, Chalmers shows that scholarly discourses of late antique disasters have mediated how certain groups such as the Samaritans are folded into our larger histories of the period, effectively determining whether they are placed at the center or in the margins. Given the entrenchment of disaster narratives in our field, the ethical implications of his analysis (what *we* do with disaster) should not be overlooked.

Moving to Erika Hermanowicz's essay, "African Ecclesiastical Wealth," we encounter a masterful example of historical revisionism. Pushing back against long-standing assumptions that fifth-century North African ecclesiastical wealth was extensive and corporately managed, Hermanowicz offers an alternative economic history for the churches in this region. Through rigorous rereadings of textual evidence in combination with the interpretive limits imposed by archaeological data, she demonstrates that North African churches continued to operate as largely independent, small-scale economic enterprises even after Donatist churches were officially dismantled in 411, and their property supposedly transmitted to Catholic institutions. In short, Hermanowicz debunks the very idea of "the African church" as a corporate economic powerhouse, arguing instead for a more pixelated, and deeply uneven, map of ecclesiastical wealth and estate management.

Lucas McMahon's article pulls us even further into the affordances and limits of late ancient materiality with his highly innovative use of digital technology to examine travel and communication along Italy's "Byzantine Corridor," the thin strip of territory linking Rome to Ravenna, the two centers of imperial power on the peninsula. In "Digital Perspectives on Overland Travel and Communications in the Exarchate of Ravenna (Sixth through Eighth Centuries)," McMahon demonstrates how tools such as GIS (Geographic Information System) analysis, when used in combination with historical evidence, can help us think more intelligently and with greater nuance about a basic but fundamental dimension of premodern state power: the logistics of official communication. McMahon's article showcases how a new method of analysis, one that produces models rather than definitive answers, can be brought into conversation with more traditional questions and forms of humanistic analysis to generate fresh perspectives on crucial, quotidian matters of late ancient society.

Finally, Michael Motia teaches us how late ancient materiality might be probed further yet. His essay, "Bluets of Late Antiquity: Polychromy and Christian Mysticism," offers us another twist on the recent "chromatic turn" in late ancient studies. Building on work by Patricia Cox Miller and others,

Motia seeks to do with color what scholars have long done with the words: explore its affective meanings, not simply as referent or sign but as a form of synesthetic experience.¹ Focusing on the color blue and carefully contextualizing his analysis within ancient scientific theories of visual perception (“to study color,” he notes, “requires historicization” [341]). Motia shows how the eastern Christian authors Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius of Pontus, and Dionysius the Areopagite variously expressed mystical experience as chromatic sensation, wherein God was to them, in some way or another, blue. The article presents a prime example of how we might better understand Late Antiquity’s strangeness by focusing our attention on alternative textual elements, by bringing the history of science to bear on the analysis of patristic literature, and by seeking dialogue with interlocutors outside an exclusively late ancient frame, as shown in Motia’s insightful integration of modern and contemporary literature, including philosophy and fiction. ■

1. Patricia Cox Miller, “The Little Flower Is Blue: Relics and the Poeticizing of the Body,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8, no. 2 (2000): 213–36.