

WILL RESEARCH INTO THE HISTORY OF CITIES CHANGE OUR HYPOTHESES CONCERNING LATE ANTIQUITY? (A REVIEW ARTICLE)

Mark HUMPHRIES, *Cities and the Meanings of Late Antiquity*, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2019 (Brill Research Perspectives), 112 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-42260-5 (e-book ISBN 978-90-04-42261-2), €70,00.

In the still topical and lively discourse on understanding particular phenomena connected with Late Antiquity, we have taken note of a very interesting and relevant publication. Its author, Mark HUMPHRIES (= H.), is a well-known scholar in the fields of Antiquity and Late Antiquity, and is currently the head of the Department of Classics, Ancient History and Egyptology at the University of Swansea. His research is focused on such subjects as the growth of Christianity in the Late Antiquity Mediterranean, relations between Imperial and local authorities in the 3rd–6th centuries, or the transformation and transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages. The most significant areas of interest in those publications by H. which I have referred to or discussed in my own research are Late Antique sources¹, the history of Christianity², cities³ and elites⁴, as well as his methodological and historiographical propositions relating to defining and understanding the phenomena that accompanied the transformations in the broadly conceived Roman world in the period spanning from the late 3rd century up to the turn of the 7th century⁵.

The current study, *Cities and the Meaning of Late Antiquity*, is undoubtedly an important contribution to the discourse on the significance and understanding of Late Antiquity. At the same time, it is a noteworthy voice in the scholarly dispute that has been going on since the late decades of the 18th century, namely how to interpret the process which Edward GIBBON referred to as “the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire”. In the last half-century, this dispute has seen several significant

¹ M. HUMPHRIES, *Chronicle and Chronology: Prosper of Aquitaine, his Methods and the Development of Early Medieval Chronography*, *Early Medieval Europe* V 1996, pp. 155–175; IDEM, *Rufinus’s Eusebius: Translation, Continuation, and Edition in the Latin Ecclesiastical History*, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* XVI 2008, pp. 143–164; IDEM, *Narrative and Space in Christian Chronography: John of Biclaro on East, West, and Orthodoxy*, in: P. VAN NUFFELEN (ed.), *Historiography and Space in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge 2019, pp. 86–112.

² M. HUMPHRIES, *Communities of the Blessed*, Oxford 1999; IDEM, *Early Christianity*, London–New York 2006; IDEM, *Liturgy and Laity in Late-Antique Rome: Problems, Sources, and Social Dynamics*, *Studia Patristica* LXX 2014, pp. 171–186.

³ M. HUMPHRIES, *Valentinian III and the City of Rome (425–55): Patronage, Politics, Power*, in: L. GRIG, G. KELLY (eds.), *Two Romes: Rome and Constantinople in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 2012, p. 161–182.

⁴ M. HUMPHRIES, *Family, Dynasty, and the Construction of Legitimacy from Augustus to the Theodosians*, in: Sh. TOUGHER (ed.), *The Emperor in the Byzantine World. Proceedings of the 47th Byzantine Spring Symposium, Cardiff 2014*, New York–Abingdon 2019, pp. 13–27; IDEM, *Roman Senators and Absent Emperors in Late Antiquity*, *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia* XVII 2003, pp. 27–46.

⁵ M. HUMPHRIES, *Late Antiquity and World History: Challenging Conventional Narratives and Analyses*, *Studies in Late Antiquity* I 2017, pp. 8–37.

developments. As there is no space here for any more detailed presentation, I shall only refer to a couple of “milestones” in the discourse thus far. The theory of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire and the ancient classical civilisation was also predominant in the second half of the 20th century (although already in the 1920s Henri PIRENE referred to the period of the transformation and the definitive end of Antiquity only during the Arab Conquest⁶). Alexander DEMANDT presents an overview of the whole history of interpretations and evaluations of the fall of Rome as seen in later periods, making reference to the fall and the decomposition of the Roman Empire even in the title of one of his works⁷. On the other hand, the path initially set out by PIRENE was later pursued by Peter BROWN, who perceives Late Antiquity as a period of transformation rather than the decline of the Roman world. He does not accept remaining in a kind of a stalemate situation between the deplored ruins of Antiquity and the nascent new reality, preferring instead to connect those opposite points by means of a bridge of diversified transformation⁸. BROWN’s standpoint has been accepted by some scholars. In a rather radical view of this subject, Glen BOWERSOCK⁹ questions the significance of the fall of Rome and claims that the exaggerated view of this process is only a projection of the fears prevailing among scholars of the past centuries in reaction to the changes taking place in the world. Incursions of foreign religions and cultures, which GIBBON would consider as criteria instrumental to the fall, have become a part of the 20th century reality accepted by BOWERSOCK’s contemporaries, hence “the fall of Rome is no longer needed”¹⁰. Regardless of the correctness of such hypotheses, BOWERSOCK points to something important here: our appraisal of history depends on our perception of the present times and goes through the process of dynamic changes. The first decade of the 21st century has brought a departure from BROWN’s theory. Wolf LIEBESCHUETZ has depicted the decline and fall of the Roman city very clearly and although he discerns some elements of transformation in the *civitates* of Gaul and the cities of Spain in his later collection of articles on the East and the West in Late Antiquity, he still upholds his view of religious and ethnic conflicts having an overwhelmingly negative impact on the course of events¹¹. Definitely more in support of the theory of the fall of Rome and the Roman civilisation, Bryan WARD-PERKINS has stressed the traumatic experience of the Barbarian invasions and their long-term effects as well as the destruction of the economic system established in Antiquity¹². As regards the eventual fate of the cities, a similar view has been proposed by Rene PFEILSCHIFTER¹³. In recent years, we have once again noticed a revival of thinking in terms of a transformation, especially among those scholars who are involved in research on the invasions and the subsequent settlement

⁶ H. PIRENE H., *Les villes du moyen âge. Essai d’histoire économique et sociale*, Bruxelles 1927.

⁷ A. DEMANDT, *Der Fall Roms: Die Auflösung des Römischen Reiches im Urteil der Nachwelt*, München 1984.

⁸ P. BROWN, *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad*, London 1971, p. 7.

⁹ G.W. BOWERSOCK, *The Vanishing Paradigm of the Fall of Rome*, Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences XLIX 1996, No. 8, pp. 29–43.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 43: “It is a world that finds hope and inspiration in the religious intensity and mixed cultures of late antiquity. The fall of Rome is no longer needed, and like the writing on a faded papyrus, it no longer speaks to us”.

¹¹ W. LIEBESCHUETZ, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City*, Oxford 2001; IDEM, *East and West in Late Antiquity. Invasion, Settlement, Ethnogenesis and Conflicts of Religion*, Leiden–Boston 2015 (esp. the chapter “Transformation and Decline: Are the Two Really Incompatible?”, pp. 29–54).

¹² B. WARD-PERKINS, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*, Oxford 2005, esp. pp. 117–122, 128–137.

¹³ R. PFEILSCHIFTER, *Die Spätantike. Der eine Gott und die vielen Herrscher*, München 2014, p. 154.

activity of the Germanic tribes within the territories of the Roman Empire. 28 years after the publication of a study on the Roman Empire and the Germanic peoples, Herwig WOLFRAM has undertaken a narrative along the lines of the Roman Empire and *its* Germanic peoples, which is a reflection of his inclination towards the theory of transformation¹⁴. Likewise, in his recent monograph on Theoderic the Great, Hans-Ulrich WIEMER paints a picture of the still existent world of Roman Italy surviving in co-existence with the realm of Ostrogoth Italy¹⁵.

What kind of position does H.'s latest study occupy among all these various views and hypotheses? In a well-ordered manner, the author conducts his narrative through a range of various aspects of the existence of Late Antique cities. Following the first two brief chapters with an introduction to the subject matter and a presentation of sources as well as the current state of the academic debate on the history of the Late Antique cities, the subsequent six chapters deal with the following topics: what a city in Late Antiquity really was; the cities and the Roman state in Late Antiquity; cities and economic transformation in (Late) Antiquity; religion and the city; the remnants of the material substance of the cities and their societies; and, finally, a recapitulation with a reference to the title of this study, *Cities and the Meanings of Late Antiquity*. This final part brings a fundamental question concerning the cities of Late Antiquity, namely if what we can see is the decline, fall, transformation or rise. The author uses the method of illustrating specific issues with examples of the processes taking place in selected cities and he looks for differences and similarities among those processes, in an attempt to find some universal patterns. This particular method could be considered effective, but only with the reservation that sometimes incomparable circumstances (not so much phenomena in general) are subjected to comparison. If a comparative juxtaposition of Constantinople, Thessalonica, Rome, Arles, Mérida, and Carthage in the 4th century should not lead us to evaluating processes taking place in some radically different circumstances, we would definitely embark on comparing fairly diverse phenomena happening in the vastly different circumstances over the course of the 5th century or, even more so, in the 6th–7th centuries. Is this something for which the author should be criticised? I do not think so, because as he has been able to demonstrate that certain processes take place in similar ways, he also proceeds to show that some phenomena which are considered typical of the period can be found in the cities of Late Antiquity (in various forms and levels of intensity) in spite of the very diverse political circumstances and forms of superior authority. The source base used by the author comprises written sources, both historiographical and literary (including Christian literature), works on rhetoric, epistolography, but also epigraphy, codices of laws (both Roman and “Barbarian”), and the very thoroughly employed results of the latest archaeological research. The bibliography comprising no less than 403 items used for the purpose of this study gives us some idea of the author's vast scope of literary and academic competence, attesting to his presence in the mainstream of the discourse on Late Antique history and civilisation.

In his introduction, H. begins with a reference to Peter BROWN's lecture given at Harvard University in 1976, quoting the sentence “I wish I had been one of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus” (p. 2). As we know, those seven fervent Christians of Ephesus escaped the persecutions during the emperor Decius' reign by taking shelter in a hillside cave near the city. Completely unaware, they fell asleep and woke up almost two centuries later, in the emperor Theodosius II's reign. They sent one of their number, named Malchus, back to Ephesus and he was quite astonished to see the sign of the cross above the city gate, churches in the city, and Christian priests moving freely in the streets. However, the city did not seem to have changed in any other aspect and he thought that he was still in Decius' time and that by some miracle the former persecutor's heart had been changed.

¹⁴ H. WOLFRAM, *Das Reich und die Germanen. Zwischen Antike und Mittelalter*, Berlin 1990; IDEM, *Das Römerreich und seine Germanen. Eine Erzählung von Herkunft und Ankunft*, Köln 2018.

¹⁵ H.U. WIEMER, *Theoderich der Grosse. König der Goten – Herrscher der Römer*, München 2018.

It was only his naive question about Decius and an encounter with a local bishop that allowed him to discover the truth about his two-century long sleep and his return to the same, yet already very different, city. H. makes this story a symbolic *leitmotiv* of his study, with Malchus walking through the streets of Late Antique cities, also wandering around beyond the city walls, looking into church interiors, walking around the sites such as the urban fora and various amphitheatres, taking notice of what had remained and what had changed.

In his discussion of the Late Antique city, the author shows how the *decorum* of the city was represented in the rhetoric of Late Antiquity. Menander Rhetor (3rd century CE) established a certain model of how to praise a city with reference to its location, climate, the origins of its founders and the most significant events in its history. In his comparison of the description of Antioch as found in a speech by Libanios (pp. 21–23) and the one included in John Malalas' chronicle (pp. 23–25), H. points to a new view of the glorification of cities in the Christian milieu of Late Antiquity. Libanios, a continuator of Classical (pagan) Antiquity, and John Malalas, a representative of the values of the Christian era, are not very different in their laudations of the climate and infrastructure of the city, but in their respective evaluations of its historical events and developments their paths diverge completely. To Libanios, the essential facts are connected with the city's origins related to Alexander the Great and the Seleucid Empire as well as the incorporation of Antioch into the broader structure of Roman power, while John Malalas' interest in the grand history of Antioch is focused on references to the Seleucid ruler Antioch IV Epiphanes and the Maccabean Revolt, the Apostle Peter's and Paul's visit to the city, and the persecution of local Christians. And once again, the author points out that the descriptions of the city as found in Libanios and John Malalas are reminiscent of how Malchus would have viewed Ephesus before his sleep and after his awakening. Christianity, the Church, and all the ecclesiastical institutions became significant elements that distinguished the city in Late Antiquity. They were situated in prominent places in many ancient cities or somewhere very close by. With the advent and growth of new urban development, they would become central points of the municipal public space, as the author points out in his account of the description of Iustiniana Prima by Procopius of Caesarea (pp. 29 f.)¹⁶. Along with the aqueduct, porticoes, squares and the grand secular buildings, it is the splendour of the churches that creates the glory of the city erected in the emperor Justinian's native region, foreshadowing its future metropolitan status.

In his discussion of the roles of the state and state politics in the cities of Late Antiquity, the author indicates several characteristic features. The first one concerns a transformation in the general appearance of cities brought about by the rising threat of Barbarian raids. Cities such as Athens in the 3rd century or Aquileia in the 5th century would erect new defences and fortifications at the expense of allowing the demolition and reuse of building material from ancient structures or reducing the spatial area of the city. Walls designed to contain the urban settlement area, not just the core of the city, became an essential element of the urban landscape (p. 32). As an important characteristic of Late Antiquity, H. considers an increase in the number of the Imperial residential cities, of course to the advantage of the specific cities (pp. 33–35). The prerequisites for the existence of the Tetrarchy had made it necessary to establish more than one Imperial residence at locations closer to the boundaries of the Roman Empire. Trier, Milan, Thessalonica and Nicomedia gained in prominence as a result of the rebuilding and development of the representative urban space, hippodromes, mausoleums and public monuments attesting to the emperors' power (the author cites the example of the Arch of Galerius at Thessalonica; cf. p. 33). In this particular context then, it is easier to speak of growth rather than decline or fall. H.'s account of the development of city topography as designed to serve the purposes of public ceremonies and etiquettes connected with the court and the emperor (where the author draws on the example of Constantinople) is both meaningful and convincing (pp. 35–37). The cities' relations with the central authority are emphasised on

¹⁶ Procop. *Aed.* IV 1, 19–25.

the occasion of the emperor's ceremonial arrival (*adventus*) in those cities where he held no official residence. H. recalls the spectacular *adventus* of Constantius II in Rome in 357, the tragic results of the efforts undertaken by the local authorities of Dadastana during their reception of the emperor Jovian in the year 364 (pp. 38 f.), and the exultant public welcome ceremonials in Rome held for the images arriving in substitution of the rulers themselves (Anastasius I and Phocas, p. 39). The author demonstrates that the emphasis on the association between the ruler and the city and the reassertion of his presence there (even during his absence) was an element of the manifestation of a certain continuity of ancient forms and customs. He also points out that this tradition did not disappear under Barbarian rule: let us mention such events as the *adventus* of Theodoric the Great in Rome in the year 500 (with the preservation of all the crucial elements from the Imperial period as well as the ceremonial greetings by the clergy, the Senate and the people) and Clovis' solemn arrival at Tours (p. 43). A completely new element, unknown in Classical Antiquity, is the *adventus* of the holy relics as exemplified by the official reception of Saint Stephen's relics by Theodosius II and Pulcheria in Constantinople in the year 420/421 (p. 40). It is a pity that H. does not take the phenomenon of "Barbarian" continuity into consideration, with such examples as the solemn *adventus* of Saint Martin of Tours' relics in Braga under King Chararic's reign¹⁷.

The area in which H. comes closest to the pessimistic views held by the proponents of the "decline and fall of ancient civilisation" theory is his account of the economic processes taking place in the changing world of the Late Antique cities. He takes notice of the decline in the long-distance trade beginning in the West in the course of the 4th and 5th centuries and in the East in the 6th and 7th centuries (p. 45). However, he also advises us to avoid generalisations and cites examples of economic growth such as the church estates at Petra in Jordan (p. 46) and the thriving seaports both in the Roman Empire (Caesarea Maritima) and beyond, e.g. Marseilles in Gaul under Merovingian rule (pp. 48 ff.). His conclusion that there is no one model of economic prosperity or decline (only various narratives of many different cities) is correct. In spite of all that could be said about Rome, where the Forum of Augustus became a place like a quarry, there was agrarianisation of the urban space, and a considerable decline in the local and regional settlement to the north of Rome (pp. 47, 50)¹⁸, we could not fail to notice the stable situation of the cities in northern Africa over the 6th century, or the growth of the *civitates* in Gaul, the cities in Spain or the ports as hubs of economic activity. We can only agree with H.'s opinion that the economic history of Late Antique cities is a "tale of many cities" (p. 47).

At the beginning of his analysis of the expansion of Christianity in the Late Antique cities, the author notes that the new religion had been growing, from the beginning, in the *civitates* rather than in the rural areas (p. 52). He believes that the most characteristic traits that distinguish the cities of Late Antiquity from those of Classical Antiquity are the rise in the stature of the bishops and the greater scope of their authority, but also transformations in the functionality of public spaces. Ever since the synod of Serdica (343), cities had become the bishops' principal seats of residence. It was already in Constantine's reign that they had obtained the right of arbitration in legal disputes as well as the rights to liberate slaves and participate in the *cursus publicus* network. H. is correct in his opinion that the role and position held by the bishops form a kind of a bridge connecting Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, even though he does not observe that, in the western part of the Roman Empire, the bishops' strong position in the cities was not just a question of granted privileges, but also of hard necessity. The Barbarian invasions in Gaul, Spain and Africa caused the nearly complete disappearance of the central state administration. Those circumstances led to situations in which the bishop was frequently the only local authority capable of negotiating or settling the terms of co-habitation with the newly arrived strangers. By assuming the role of the *defensor*

¹⁷ Gregorius Turonensis, *De virtutibus Sancti Martini*, in: *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 12, ed. B. KRUSCH, p. 595, 28 ff.

¹⁸ For a comparison, see WARD-PERKINS, *op. cit.* (n. 12), the maps on pp. 140 f.

civitatis, he would quite naturally become a locally recognised figure of authority – in religious, administrative, or even military matters¹⁹. In this sense, the bishops as those who took over the prerogatives of the secular authorities of Classical Antiquity should be seen as a specific bridge between the earlier period and Late Antiquity. Another characteristic feature of the expansion of Christianity in cities was the banishing of pagan elements from the public space, which the author illustrates by citing the example of Milan (p. 57). This cultural transformation was foreshadowed by such phenomena and occurrences as demolishing or taking over the sites of pagan worship for religious or secular purposes. Entrenched in the structure of a Late Antique city, Christianity contributed to the actual extinction of some forms of urban life known from Classical Antiquity, as reflected in the example of public games. Legally prohibited in cases of attempting to practise pagan traditions, and morally condemned by the Church, they were banished from the public space of the city at times even by physical means such as the erection of a church within the arena of the amphitheatre at Tarragon and the reuse of the architectural *spolia* from the Milan amphitheatre for the construction of the foundations of the S. Lorenzo Church (p. 79).

Transformations in the public space of Late Antique cities were accompanied by the changing lifestyles of the elites. Except for military and clerical circles, the local elites had continued to remain stable since the period of Classical Antiquity, although their lifestyles and forms of status aggrandisement had been changing over time. Work in service of the city and its citizens was still glorified, although the ancient classical notion of euergetism as directed towards the urban community was replaced with the Christian concept of *caritas* focused on the individual human being and associated with the hope of attaining one's own spiritual advancement. The manifestations of familial status would not take the form of participating in municipal celebrations, or in events held at the extramural cemeteries or the amphitheatre, as they were becoming more prominently displayed in the hierarchy of receiving the Eucharist and the preference for burials in the proximity of churches located within the city walls. However, some forms of elite self-aggrandisement remained unchanged (office diptychs, funerary inscriptions with references to Christian *virtutes*, name inscriptions in the hippodrome and amphitheatre auditoria (e.g., Rome, Aphrodisias; cf. pp. 72 f.).

The final chapter (pp. 82–90) contains the author's conclusions. The question "decline, fall, transformation, or rise" recurs once again. H. reverts to the departure from Peter BROWN's transformation theory and the tendencies towards the views represented by Wolf LIEBESCHUETZ, Ine JACOBS, Bryan WARD-PERKINS, and some other models of the decline and fall. He also recalls the results of research showing that the collapse of the 6th and 7th centuries was followed by a revitalisation of urban life (e.g. Adriaan VERHULST's exploration of some parts of Gaul). The author concludes that the crisis of the cities is not an exclusive characteristic of Late Antiquity as such processes also took place in Classical Antiquity, but he proposes that the urban phenomena of Late Antiquity should not be taken into account as part of one general formula, as they need to be regarded as a multitude of different narratives with diverse symptoms. Very much would depend on where, when, and in what conditions such accounts are created and the evaluation or appraisal of the processes happening in the cities of Late Antiquity must be formulated with local/regional diversity and sensibilities (which, let us add, tend to change over time) being taken into consideration. It is true that many phenomena or events happening in the cities of the period could not be regarded as instances of positive or even neutral transformation even with the best of intentions. It is also true that certain social processes such as transformations of public space, changing urban topographies, or the ransacking and demolition of ancient buildings in order to make way for new architecture can be observed in a great number of towns and cities. However, in the author's opinion, one cannot ignore the fact that the particular contexts of such phenomena tend to change. The

¹⁹ S. BAUMGART, *Die Bischofsherrschaft im Galien des 5. Jahrhunderts*, München 1995; G. MAIER, *Amträger und Herrscher in der Romania Gothica. Vergleichende Untersuchungen zu den Institutionen der ostgermanischen Völkerwanderungsreiche*, Stuttgart 2005, pp. 279–289.

development of cities in Late Antiquity was varied and should not be seen as one homogeneous and uncomplicated history. In spite of the fact that we have to deal with many micro-histories here, we should not give up on searching for some more analytical approaches. However, we need to stop trying to fit the history of cities in Late Antiquity into the uniform patterns of transformation or decline. Instead, we should attempt to examine and compare the histories of specific places from the vantage point of analytical and theoretical perspectives. The history of Late Antique cities is not a history of just one or several municipalities, but of many thousands of different cities. And this is exactly what, in my opinion, makes Mark HUMPHRIES' book a valuable publication and what makes it particularly significant to further research in this field. Despite the still-ongoing modern tendency to confine history within patterns and models, the author portrays it as it really is: vivid, diverse and multi-faceted.

Marek Wilczyński
Pedagogical University of Cracow
marek.wilczynski@up.krakow.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-0792-9395