

Peter Brown:

### **Towards a Wider Late Antiquity**

What I have to offer on this occasion is a small return for a very great honour. I hope that it is an apposite return, and especially in the country which provided a home and a bracing cultural environment for the greatest historian of all, of the last centuries of the ancient world.

Edward Gibbon wrote his monumental *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in Lausanne between 1776 and 1784. What is not so often realized is that Gibbon's first wish had been to write a *History of the Liberty of the Swiss*. He warmed to such a theme: "so full of public spirit... of examples of virtue, of lessons in government". He added that, when he first thought of this work, in 1755, "The fashion of climbing the mountains and reviewing the Glaciers had not yet been introduced by foreign travellers, who seek the sublime beauties of nature". Those foreign travelers paid insufficient attention to what was really important about Switzerland: "the face of a country diversified by the forms and spirit of so many republics".

It is in his robust appreciation of the "liberty of the Swiss" that Gibbon still speaks to us all, even to those of us who, as modern scholars of the end of the ancient world, do not share his anti-religious prejudices, and are no longer entirely convinced by his magnificent unfolding of the story of the end of Rome.

To offer a different interpretation of the period between 200 AD and 800 AD is to step out from under the mighty shadow of Edward Gibbon. But it is also to step out from the shadow of European nightmares that had developed in more recent times.

Let us begin with the mood of the Europe of the 1950s, when many of us were young scholars. It was a Europe which had only recently emerged from an age of tyranny and violence. It was a Post-War world, set against the further, spreading shadow of the Cold War. The mood was favorable to dark thoughts. Conflict, the breakdown of ancient institutions and the passing of ancient ways of life and thought: these were the themes on which historians of antiquity tended to concentrate when they turned to the Roman world in its last centuries.

But that was in the 1950s. Where are we now? How did we get there? And what can we do to exploit the windows opened to us by half a century of scholarship?

First and foremost, we have grown tired of melodramatic ruminations on decline and fall and on the end of civilization. Such rhetoric now strikes us as a form of cultural narcissism. Like hypochondriacs who consider that their illness alone is worthy of attention, those who adopted the rhetoric of crisis and decline (both for Rome and for modern Europe) seemed to assume that the dilemmas of their own times (terri-

ble though these might be) could be directly projected on to the history of a society separated from us by a huge gulf of space and time. They were prepared to listen to the distant past of Rome only if it seemed to speak to them about themselves.

What can we offer instead? It is above all a vision of the history of Europe set in a wider world. In the first place, historians of late antiquity have tended to turn East, to study the Greek-speaking provinces of the Roman empire. Like the Constantine of Dante, the study of late antiquity *si fece greco* – “has become Greek”. But it cannot be said (as Dante did of Constantine) that this good intention *fe' mal frutto* – “has brought forth bad fruit”. Decades of study of the eastern provinces of the Roman empire in the late antique period have resulted in a greater respect for the vigor and diversity of the civilization of Byzantium in the first centuries of its formation.

In this exploration of East Rome, a landscape still bathed in the late afternoon sun of Hellenism, I owe so much to an entire movement in European and American scholarship; but most of all, in the English-speaking world, to my friends Alan Cameron, Dame Averil Cameron, Sir Fergus Millar and Glen Bowersock. It was good to have grown up as a scholar beside such a *thiasos* of happy giants.

This change has amounted to nothing less than a de-centering of Europe. Gibbon was supremely contemptuous of Byzantium. For him, and for many who followed him, the “awful revolution” of the decline and fall of the Roman empire was a drama that had been played out on the well-known stage of western Europe alone. What is overlooked in such a view is the fact that, when seen against the backdrop of Eurasia, the western parts of the Roman empire had been a distant and largely underdeveloped region, peripheral to the ancient heartlands of the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. These ancient heartlands did not move to the rhythm of decline and fall.

But for me and for many others, the greatest excitement of all has been the realization that this landscape did not stop at the borders of the Greek-speaking world. The study of late antiquity has come to include the great Third World of the Sasanian empire of Persia and the cultural powerhouse of a largely Syriac-speaking Christianity which stretched east of Antioch as far as the Iranian plateau, as far north as the Caucasus and as far south as Ethiopia. (Indeed, in the form of Manichaean and Nestorian communities, a recognizably late antique version of Christianity had, by the seventh century, reached the oasis cities of the Taklamakan desert and the foreign quarters of Chang'an/modern Xian, the western capital of China, to survive there for many centuries).

In our own times, it is important to stress the wider landscape against which the world of late antiquity must be placed. The rapidly growing body of scholar-

ship devoted to the history and literature of the Christianities of the East comes as a challenge. Those of us who wish to find what are now called “the Christian roots of Europe” must realize that Christianity has never been an exclusively European religion. We do not live in a sheltered oasis, content only with the riches of Greece and Rome. We have deeper roots and have been nourished from yet further abroad. Those who wish to follow the destinies of Christianity in its fullness must be prepared to add to their command of Latin and Greek the languages of the Christian Orient – such as Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian and Ethiopic. They must be prepared to take long, hot journeys to what, alas, have become in modern times troubled lands. They will find the “Christian roots of Europe” where they might least expect to find them: on the banks of the Euphrates, along the Nile and in the highlands of Armenia and Ethiopia.

I am reminded of the words of the great Greek poet, George Seferis in a moving passage of his *Meres* (his *Diary*) from July 1942 (4:224). Standing inside the old city of Jerusalem, crowded with the shrines of three world-religions, he realized (in the midst of the Second World War) that the battle of his time was not “for the civilization of Europe” alone. It was for *to ánthrôpo* for humanity itself. And this is a humanity whose principal protagonists in both Europe and the Middle East either came into being or were transformed in the great cultural and religious mutation of late antiquity. It is in late antiquity, and not in the Dream Time of classical Greece and Rome, that, as Jews of the Talmudic tradition, as Christians and as early Muslims, *to ánthrôpo*, the “human essence” of which Seferis spoke, took on features that are still recognizable today.

For this reason, my project attempts to reach beyond the conventional boundaries of the ancient world through an intensive study of the topography and literature of the Syriac-speaking world in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

In the words of Dr. Sebastian Brock, the internationally acclaimed and beloved doyen of Syriac studies: “Syriac is the third largest surviving literature of late antiquity, coming after the much more familiar Greek and Latin... [To ignore this literature] when one is dealing with the Eastern Mediterranean world of late antiquity is a serious loss”<sup>6</sup>.

Our first loss is a sense of scale. Syriac, the final, classical version of the Aramaic spoken by Jesus of Nazareth, was a language that stood at the crossroads between

<sup>6</sup> Sebastian Brock, “Saints in Syriac: A Little-Tapped Resource”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16 (2008): 181-196, at p. 181.

the Mediterranean and Asia. There was a time, around 700 AD, when, in the form of books, scribbled ostraca, papyri and inscriptions, Syriac bridged Eurasia, from Antioch to western China and from northern Iraq to southern India. Men of learning in the Syriac tradition looked back to a Greek and, even, through Greek, to a Roman heritage. A writer in a monastery on the banks of the Euphrates in the eighth century could still comment on the story of Romulus and Remus and on the meaning of the name of the river Tiber.

Second: in ignoring Syriac, we fail to appreciate the vitality of a major Christian region of late antiquity. Quite as much as my native Ireland in the distant West, this was a land of “saints and scholars” – and, better yet, of poets. The fourth century Syrian hymn-writer, Ephraim of Edessa, has rightly been acclaimed as “perhaps the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante”<sup>1</sup>. And what we hear in Ephraim and his successors is not simply a Christianity which happens to be in Syriac. It is a distinctive Christianity, with an oriental voice all of its own, whose warmth and generosity of expression brought a quite distinctive, liberating flavor to other Christian traditions – beginning with Greek Byzantium and continuing up to our own times.

The spiritual ferment of the Syriac world continued deep into the first centuries of Islam. Not only did the work of Syriac scholars as translators and commentators of Greek texts nourish the intellectual life of the early Caliphate of Baghdad. As apologists for Christianity and as representatives of distinctive forms of piety, Syriac Christians contributed as much to the formation of early medieval Islamic civilization as they had contributed, in previous centuries, to the spiritual world of East Rome.

Third: we lose a series of distinctive landscapes illuminated for us by the vivid saints of the Syriac world. Eminently local figures, linked to their admirers by a shared language, the saints of the Syriac-speaking world were the subject of a hagiographical tradition that remained close to the earth. In the *Lives* of the Syrian saints we glimpse the late antique world very much from the bottom up. These texts provide us with precious evidence for the life and attitudes of communities scattered throughout the Middle East, as ordinary men and women faced both the challenges of daily life and the great changes of their times.

It is to trace these vivid figures, each set in their own distinctive landscape, that I hope to use the generous funds provided by the Balzan Foundation. I trust that what I have said about the development of the study of late antiquity in general will en-

<sup>1</sup> Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge University Press 1975): 31.

able you to understand the need for such a project in particular. What I would stress here is the appropriateness of such a project to our own times.

The development of computer data-bases has now enabled us to gather, rationalize and render accessible the vast mass of hitherto neglected Syriac texts. The Syriac Reference Portal ([www.syriac.ua.edu](http://www.syriac.ua.edu)), a joint project of Princeton University and the University of Alabama, has begun to show what can be done. Under the vigorous guidance of my student and now fellow-colleague, Professor David Michelson, Syriac Reference Portal has begun to compile and organize all core data related to the study of Syriac sources. It has created digital tools for widely disseminating this data and for facilitating further research and these are organized through an online hub (a solid cyber-infrastructure) for future research on Syriac materials. Access to all published material, to all catalogues of Syriac manuscripts and to all learned commentary on this material will be made available. We will no longer need to say what Michelet once said: “Les véritables inédits ce sont les imprimés”. They will be there, on line. Furthermore, the catalogues which record the presence of a mass of as yet unpublished Syriac texts in European collections will be made available in a single system.

The digitization of these manuscripts, both in Europe and in the Middle East and India, is proceeding at a brisk pace. This pace is quickened by the sense of insecurity of the many Middle Eastern regions where Syriac Christian communities exist and where the riches of a Syriac tradition can still be found.

My project is entitled “Figures in a Landscape”<sup>2</sup>. It will make use of this formidable new engine of research. It will identify the locations of Syriac monasteries and Syriac centers of culture. It will establish the topography of the activities of holy men of the varied Syriac traditions, across an area which once extended from modern eastern Turkey, through Syria and northern Iraq to the borders of Iran. It will give us, for the first time, a map of a distinctive religious and cultural landscape that will be as detailed and as instructive as the great *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World* has proved to be for the history of the Greco-Roman world.<sup>3</sup> Last but not least, it will bring this vivid world, illuminated by the lives of its saints, to the attention of scholars and educated readers through a series of translations of these *Lives* that survived in impressive numbers (many of them as yet unpublished, and many, even, awaiting discovery) in both Syriac and in the Christian Arabic of later centuries.

<sup>2</sup> See “Figures in a Landscape: Topography and Hagiography in the World of Syriac Christianity”, p. 88.

<sup>3</sup> *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, ed. Richard J. A. Talbert (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2000).

Alas, there is little need to remind you that now is the time to act. The troubled state of the present-day Middle East has ensured that the diversity of cultures which had for so long flourished in these lands can no longer be taken for granted. It can only too easily be erased by modern levels of violence and by modern ideologies committed to modern notions of cultural homogeneity.

In this situation, it is the duty of the historian of late antiquity to point out that, if the rare diversity of the Syriac tradition is weakened or lost, it is not simply an exotic minority which has suffered. Something of the essence and rich taste of the Europe that was created in late antiquity, through its contact with a wider, richer world, will have gone. It is, therefore, an honour – and a heavy responsibility to which I hope to live up – to be given, through the project grant of the Balzan Foundation, the means to contribute, if only a little, to making known and available to others the fragile riches of a distant world, which still has within it the capacity both to surprise the scholar and to nourish the imagination of educated persons.

*Ulrich W. Suter:* Thank you Peter Brown for this well-informed, profound, entertaining and hopeful talk and the optimism that digital tools more often used by scientists might find an active role in historical studies. Now to add some commentary and maybe pose some question, we turn to Seraina Ruprecht. Ms. Ruprecht is a post-graduate at the Institute of History at the University of Berne, in the Department of Ancient History and the Received History of Antiquity.

### **Comments, Questions and Preliminary Discussion**

*Seraina Ruprecht:* Thank you so much for your fascinating presentation, Professor Brown. In ‘the mighty shadow of Edward Gibbon’, as you have just aptly formulated, Late Antiquity has, for a very long time indeed, been perceived as a period of deterioration, disintegration and decadence, marking the end of the classical era and heralding the – rather dark – Middle Ages. Ever since Humanism, in fact, this period was regarded as one of decline. Different theories have been proposed to explain the fall of the Roman Empire. Among the most prominent causes that have been suggested are the rise of Christianity, the contrast between rich and poor, the migration of the Germanic peoples, depleted environmental conditions and depopulation. However, lead poisoning and hypothermia were also taken into consideration<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Stefan Rebenich, “Late Antiquity in Modern Eyes”, in: Philip Rousseau (ed.), *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, Oxford 2009, 78.