

Catherine Fales Cooper, Julia Hillner, eds.. *Religion, Dynasty and Patronage in Early Christian Rome, 300-900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xv + 327 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-87641-4.



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This book, featuring essays by nine authors--most of them presently or formerly associated with the Centre for Late Antiquity at the University of Manchester--achieves a coherence rare in edited collections. Despite the long time span covered, the essays are linked by location (Rome, and Rome's relations with other centers), subject matter (Roman bishops, aristocrats, and emperors; property and patronage; competitive or collaborative models of authority), and sources (including problems occasioned by the disappearance of sources). Various essays explicitly raise historiographical and methodological issues (e.g., the explicit avoidance of "Whig" approaches to history, the problems for historical analysis posed by highly rhetorical literary sources, and the appeal to the past as a form of argument for issues of the present) that will make this collection of interest to historians in other periods.

The book's overall theme centers on the ways in which lay landowners and aristocrats, bishops of Rome, and emperors variously jostled for power or cooperated on activities and goals, in the

process defining new institutional modes by their "uses of the past" (p. 141). Throughout the essays, readers become aware of the intrusion of "the East" into this very "Western" narrative. From the sixth century onward, imperial powers loom large in the Greek East in the form of Justinian, Irene, and others; Greek-speaking monks (some of them eunuchs) now inhabit Roman monasteries; and the monophysite and iconoclastic controversies have an impact on Rome's religious authorities. By the end of the story, "the North," too, has intruded: for "Constantinople," read "Aachen."

The book is divided into three sections, following a full and helpful introduction by editors Catherine Fales Cooper and Julia Hillner. Part 1, "Icons of Authority: Pope and Emperor," contains essays by Mark Humphries (on emperors and popes, from Constantine to Gregory the Great--and beyond) and by Kate Blair-Dixon (on contests for authority embedded in the *Liber Pontificalis* and the *Collectio Avellana*). Part 2, "Lay, Clerical, and Ascetic Contexts for the Roman *Gesta Martyrum*," offers essays by Kristina Sessa on house-

holds and bishops in the late ancient "papal legends"; by Hannah Jones on later uses and reception of the *Passion of Agnes*; and by Conrad Leyser on contests between imperial and monastic interests over urban property, using the *Passion of John and Paul* as a central focus. Part 3, "Religion, Dynasty, and Patronage," is comprised of four essays: by Cooper (on Roman heiresses and various approaches to wealth and poverty among aristocratic donors), by Anne Kurdock (on Anicia Demetrias's role as patron), by Hillner (on the meaning of "titular churches" in relation to forms of patronage), and by Marios Costambeys and Leyser (on the centrality of St. Stephen for the patronage of martyr cults in Roman monasteries from c.600-c.900).

Although the rise of the Roman bishopric in the sixth century as a central mediator of Rome's memory is at the fore throughout the book, the essays often challenge traditional interpretations of this phenomenon—including the sixth century as central. Three examples will suffice here. Humphries, disputing the traditional (and "teleological") view of ancient Rome's rapid fall to church dominance by the era of Gregory the Great, proposes that the creation of papal Rome should be placed only in the eighth or ninth centuries. Hillner brings new clarity to the vexed question of the meaning of "titular churches." She shows how Roman bishops solved the problem of maintaining the foundations given by lay aristocrats (who preferred one-time gifts and worried about bishops' alienating the property they had given); the bishops themselves would endow them from sources within the bishop's control. By the early fifth century, Hillner posits, a *titulus* was "a church inside the walls of the city of Rome that was dependent on the bishop's church" (p. 234). (In Hillner's reading, the Laurentian schism signals not the defeat of lay benefactors, but their success in ensuring that their gifts to the church would not be alienated by the Roman bishop.) A third example comes from an inventive essay by Costambeys and Leyser, who suggest how texts

ostensibly about Pope Leo's defiance of the empress Irene may more subtly suggest how bishops of Rome attempted to stop the flow of relics to the North. Here, Rome is not represented as passively receiving reform from the North in the ninth century and beyond, but rather as successfully rebuffing Carolingian attempts to appropriate Rome's cult of St. Stephen. The authors conclude that monastic identity in Rome was "more focused on cult than on observance or institutional structure" (p. 287).

Several essays focus on problems presented by source materials and suggest innovative ways of using these sources. The essayists frequently comment on the relative scarcity of sources for the period; nineteenth-century destruction is held responsible for some of that "lack." That aristocrats continued to serve as patrons in late antiquity is clear—but much of the direct evidence for acts of patronage appears to have vanished. Some essayists (Costambeys and Leyser, explicitly) suggest that if we changed our assumptions regarding "where to look," we might find unexpected clues. They indicate that we should look to monastic rules and charters (the latter absent from Rome until the 750s), rather than to narratives of martyrs and saints. Moreover, the editors caution readers to be aware that the needs of Rome's bishops (responsible for compiling some of the prime documents) may have distorted our understanding of the relation among the three sources of patronage (imperial, episcopal, and lay). In these essays, the lay element is especially prominent. The lay household, the editors conclude, was central to "the social and religious life in the city of Rome" (p. 16).

Blair-Dixon provides one interesting example of how sources may suggest new historical insights when read in light of each other. She treats two of the prime sources for the period, the *Liber Pontificalis* and the *Collectio Avellana*, as offering "contrasting strategies" of memory and authority (pp. 60, 76). Although the collectors' ostensible

purpose in these works was to document the past, their documentation gives clues to the writers' assessment of present events. Blair-Dixon asks, intriguingly, if the sixth-century writers' interest in the fourth-century bishop Damasus (despite their differing assessments) might not stem from their vision of him as the initiator of Rome's episcopal archives, as a forerunner to their own activity in creating the history of Rome's bureaucratic traditions.

A major focus of the book is on the ways in which bishops, lay people, and imperial powers interacted, whether competitively or cooperatively, to create new modes of Christian practice. One theme details the later renditions of saints' and martyrs' tales in which their subjects were "domesticated" to suit a later, nonascetic "mediocre" lay Christian commitment (a "mediocrity" that Robert Markus earlier highlighted in his *The End of Ancient Christianity* [1990]). Sessa, working with "papal legends," shows how the Roman martyr tales popular in the fifth to seventh centuries represent the Roman bishop and lay householders either as contesting for power or as cooperating with each other "in rituals of patronage and liturgy" (p. 99). In fact, the *domus* in these tales could even become an active liturgical site (in this case, of baptism). Unlike the moral drawn from the earlier Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, the household here is pictured as the site of pious exchange between laity and clergy/monks. Sessa deftly displays how reading these texts with a view to their anachronisms and rhetorical strategies gives a window onto historical change.

Jones, exploring the *Passio Agnetis*, cogently shows how "domestication" reworks earlier narratives. Agnes, an (alleged) fourth-century adolescent martyr, is subtly removed from the early heroic and eroticized versions of her account (well brought out earlier by Virginia Burrus) and is "domesticated" to serve new civic traditions. (A sure sign of this change, as Sessa notes, is that avarice, not lust, is now the central moral prob-

lem.) Although, Jones argues, Agnes was "a prize to be fought over," the imperial family and the Christian patronage class nonetheless teamed up to provide a cult for her that accorded well with traditional Roman "family values" (p. 121). Leyser's essay also probes a domesticating theme of a different sort. Here, the eunuch-monks of the *Passion of John and Paul* outwit imperial authorities to retain property that legend described as their own house for their monastic community by being buried in it: "by turning a house into a virtual urban cemetery, the claims of the state are rebuffed" (p. 158). Leyser also argues that scholarly assumptions regarding the prohibition of burial inside the city should be rethought.

Women get their due in these essays as well--and not only those perhaps fictitious women who are subjects of martyr tales, such as Agnes. We also find "real women," a point that Jones underscores in her discussion of the Merovingian Queen Radegund's devotion to Agnes. Prominent among the women featured in these essays is the Anician heiress Demetrias who, Kurdock argues, should be seen as an active agent in her own right rather than as a pawn in the hands of Jerome, Pelagius, and Augustine. Demetrias was the patron and founder of the Church of St. Stephen outside Rome, so prominently featured in the *Liber Pontificalis*. Both Kurdock and Cooper appeal to her story to illustrate how lay aristocrats deemed rightful stewardship of wealth a decidedly Christian, indeed ascetic, practice.

The vast wealth of patrons, such as Demetrias, suggests questions regarding Christianity and "economics." How to be Christian when one was rich was a problem that plagued Christian literature from early times. Just how much one must renounce or redirect remained a matter of debate into late antiquity, as Cooper shows. (Thinking of the poor as "porters" of the rich who would carry their goods to heaven before them, was one way by which Christian aristocrats salved their consciences.) In the era that is the fo-

cus of this book, aristocrats were glumly observing their economic base--landed estates--erode. Cooper pointedly notes that aristocrats' desire to shed their goods and their slaves in bursts of ascetic enthusiasm must have seemed less than a beneficent act to the "little people" who were dependent on them for support (p. 166). Some of the late patristic sources for this discussion, Cooper argues, appear to have been sponsored by senatorial Christians who wished to retain simultaneous possession of their estates and their Christian ideals.

This volume contains scholarly and often innovative essays designed for scholars of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Historians of other periods may also derive methodological or historiographical insights from them. The book illustrates for a particular historical period a theme popular in recent decades, the transit from "memory to written record." It also proves that collaborative labor, even in the humanities, can produce lively results.

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