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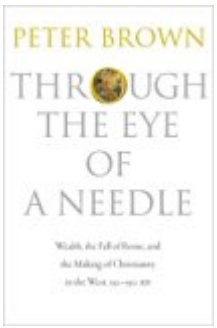

Peter Brown. *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. 792 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-691-16177-8.

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Peter Brown persuaded a generation of historians to consider the years from 200 to 750 CE less as a time of collapse and decline, the beginning of the Dark Ages, and more as a period of transition. Where Henri Pirenne's post-Roman world ended with the rise of Islam, in Brown's view, Roman influence continued to shape societies from medieval Ireland to Islam, even as some of these "peripheral" peoples penetrated the core of Rome's erstwhile Mediterranean hegemony.[1] Brown's publication of *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971) thus sparked a paradigm shift in scholarship, as historians, scholars of religious studies, and adventurous classicists followed his lead. With Averil Cameron's call to theory, a dynamic, methodologically robust field of late ancient studies took form.[2] Monographs, textbooks, professorships, and conferences now widely reflect the power and persuasiveness of Brown's insight. About a decade ago, however, some historians began sounding a cautionary note, arguing that the dramatic changes in economy, politics, and society that characterized this period of transition were still evidence of decline.[3] At the same time, late ancient studies, always attuned to methodological innovation and receptive to interdisciplinary insights, has taken a material turn.[4] Now Brown's magisterial *Through the Eye of a Needle* reengages with the transitional character of late antiquity as a historical period, incorporating this new scholarship, while also digging deeply into the problem of the falling urban populations, realigned political loyalties, and profoundly changed structure of wealth in the West that point toward a medieval economy and society.

Where *The World of Late Antiquity* gave us Brown's intuitive feel for how ancient sources could be read to testify to a time of transition, and the *Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200–1000* (1996) gave us vignettes of unique people in far-flung places cultivating an archipelago of Christianities in the West, *Through the Eye of a Needle* is an authoritative effort to get it all down: to flesh out the personalities instrumental in these communities' transformations, to populate these locales in so far as we can find

their inhabitants in inscriptions and other texts. The book is a masterpiece of historical writing: Brown's lucid, elegant prose conveys his assessment of forty years of scholarship in all the western European languages. In his view, ideas about how wealth could help or harm the soul ultimately changed the economic structure of the Roman world. Brown shows the appeal of the notion that the church was an appropriate repository for wealth and recipient of ***beneficia***, not only on the part of affluent aspiring ascetics who followed Antony's and Melania's call but also for those "middling Romans" whose contributions first established the economic solidity of the fourth-century church. This inspiration on its own, however, would not have produced the economic structures of the early Middle Ages through which, by the end of the sixth century, the church was the only landowner left standing. Brown argues that equally important were the insecurities of prolonged civil war, as he so aptly characterizes the conflicts between Germanic lords and their Roman supporters against those parts of the population that remained loyal to the emperors.

Parts 1 and 2 ("Wealth, Christianity, and Giving at the End of an Ancient World" and "An Age of Affluence") set the benchmark from which Brown tracks the changes in wealth that characterized late ancient society. Contrary to the arguments of J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz and others, Brown musters a range of inscriptional and material evidence to argue that the fourth century was "a new age of gold," as evidenced primarily in Constantine's gold ***solidus***.[5] At the same time, Constantine's vision for the bishops as mediators between rich and poor, imperial and local power, capitalized on the deep financial engagement that local notables (the people of "middling wealth") had already developed with their bishops. These changes also facilitated the movement of rich Western provincials into the Christian community, by providing a venue that idealized the philosophical values of friendship and wisdom. Brown concludes part 1 by setting out the traditional ways in which people of means used wealth to enhance their status by demonstrating their love of the city. Whereas people who sponsored games or underwrote the construction of monuments envisioned the citizens of the city as the recipients of their patronage (as inscriptional evidence testifies), bishops, such as Hilary of Arles, redefined their congregations as the ***plebs*** in need of aid and the church as the site where the wealthy could purchase heavenly treasure through their earthly gifts. Next, Brown sets out how wealth and the values associated with it mapped onto social strata, within and outside the church. In the rest of part 2, Brown homes in closely on a handful of case studies—short biographies, really—that flesh out his vision of the role of wealth in the fourth-century church and broader community: Symmachus, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine, Ausonius, Paulinus of Nola, and Jerome.

Part 3 takes us to North Africa as wealthy refugees from Alaric's siege of Rome streamed southward to take up their substantial provincial holdings. Brown shrewdly uses Augustine's experience as a lens through which to explore how the effects of Alaric's attack on the city of Rome rippled through the society, culture, and economy of the African provinces. Seen from Augustine's perspective, Alaric's assault on the capital exacerbated one crisis and provoked another. The Visigothic siege meant that when Melania the Younger and her husband decided to divest themselves of property (perhaps influenced by Rufinus and Paulinus's apocalyptic attitude toward wealth) a vast amount of capital came into the young couple's hands, liquid assets they used not to help defend the city but to give directly to their favorite causes, such as the monks (or "holy poor"). At the same time, the crisis in the capital impelled many noble Roman families who had African assets to move to their villas in Augustine's province. Notable among these were the Anicii, who had refused (like Melania) to come to the city's rescue and once in Africa asked Pelagius to preside over their daughter's taking the veil. African tradition

called for the local bishop to assume this role. Augustine's reaction was harsh even by the standards of his contemporaries. Having competed strenuously for resources with the Donatist church before 410, he was aghast, not only at the flood of capital moving independent of the bishops but also at the self-directed piety of the Roman nobility who admired Pelagius and at his followers' radical view of wealth as tainted. Where the anonymous Pelagian tract ***De divitiis*** argued on scriptural grounds that the rich were as unlikely to enter heaven as a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, Augustine countered that intentions were not enough: the rich must do good works, using their wealth, with their bishop's guidance, for the sake of the poor (i.e., the ***populus*** of the church) in atonement for their sins. In short, Brown argues, Augustine gave the wealthy a means to retain their assets, provided they worked through the bishop to sustain the church community in preference to the city. Most important, Brown reminds us that this shift in thinking about wealth played out against the context of civil war in the early fifth-century West. Recognizing that factionalism among the Western nobility exacerbated the havoc wrought by the migrating Visigoths and other trans-Danubian/trans-Rhinish groups, Brown argues that this violence was also instrumental in redistributing wealth to local notables. In short, Augustine's response to Pelagianism in the context of the relocation of Western power and wealth resulting from this civil war helped create some of the economic, social, religious, and political conditions that structured life in the Middle Ages.

Finally, in parts 4 and 5 ("Aftermath" and "Toward Another World"), Brown sketches the patterns of events that explain why the West did not reestablish itself on the same structural foundation in the fifth century as it had after the turbulence of the third century. Eschewing a survey of the entire West, Brown focuses on southern Gaul and central Italy, foreshadowing how very different Christian communities would develop in the two regions. Southern Gaul for long remained an island of Gallo-Roman life, while home to monastics and bishops strongly influenced by John Cassian's ethic of complete divestment. In Brown's view, these attributes made certain bishops Gallo-Roman enough to administer well but ascetic enough to seem holy to their communities. The independence and success of this region drew fire from Prosper of Aquitaine and Salvian. Prosper, taking his cue from Augustine's anti-Pelagianism, attacked the monastic culture of Marseille, Arles, and Lérins, claiming that "Cassian" had neglected the importance of grace in emphasizing acts of free will. For his part, Salvian railed against the persistent traditional patterns of city life, seeing the taxes that protected southern Gaul's inhabitants as a form of enslavement to Rome, which was, in turn, enslaved to the barbarian. The Roman clergy, conversely, valued hierarchy and process more than their Gallo-Roman counterparts, becoming gradually the patrons to a nobility of diminishing fortunes. We see the outlines of medieval Rome, once the bishop becomes the dispenser of the ***annona*** (allotments of the grain supply for the city's citizens) and, after Justinian's Italian wars, his diocese the largest landholder in Italy.

No late ancient historian today can match Brown's ability to delve into sources at just the right place to expose their inner luster and then array these insights in a seamless and gorgeously textured narrative covering such breadth. All the same, I am left wondering what role, if any, the East played in the economic and ideological transformation of the West. After the death of Theodosius I, the court in Constantinople tried to remain engaged in the political life of the West; it was especially interested in maintaining control of the imperial house and staving off Vandal aggression. Across the period the book covers, Constantinople became a thriving new capital, redirecting resources—material and human—toward a different imperial center. The fourth and fifth century witnessed heated quarrels between Alexandria,

Antioch, and Constantinople over the nature of the Trinity and the second person. So little a role does the East play in Brown's account that his narrative seems to take for granted the estrangement that will finally characterize Eastern and Western halves of the Mediterranean in the late sixth century. I recognize that a full treatment of the economic structure of the East in the same period is not the book that Brown wanted to write. And I am certainly not suggesting that Brown should have written a longer book. Most people will not be able to read *Through the Eye of a Needle* cover to cover but will instead dip into different chapters with different interests. Nevertheless, Brown could have given us fewer chapters on Augustine (five out of twenty-nine directly focus on the bishop) and spent more time exploring the social, political, and economic connections between the Eastern and Western churches and imperial capitals—even as they began to fade.

Although the solidity of Brown's overall conclusion about the economics of the West must wait until some companion study pulls the reasons for the East's growing estrangement into the narrative, each individual chapter is a model of the best historical scholarship. Most usefully, especially as those of us trained exclusively in the analysis of documents try to grapple with material culture, Brown shows us how to engage with artifacts and places and how to weave what we learn into our analyses and conceptual narratives. It is as if the lively, variegated *World of Late Antiquity* gained a third dimension. On its own terms this is a tremendous achievement.

In short, Brown's newest monograph belongs on the bookcase of every late ancient and medieval historian. It is a stunning accomplishment to have interwoven the stories of the fourth and fifth centuries' most influential figures while also situating them among the populations and places that gave them life. We will see the ripple effects of Brown's achievement for a long time to come.

Notes

[1]. Henri Pirenne and Jacques Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Brussels: Nouvelle société des editions, 1937); and Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade,* trans. Frank D. Halsey (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1925).

[2]. Averil Cameron, "Redrawing the Map: Early Christian Territory after Foucault," *Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986): 266-271.

[3]. For example, see Brian Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 1-8; Andrew Gillett, "Rome's Fall and Europe's Rise: A View from Late Antiquity," review article, *The Medieval Review* 7, no. 10 (2007), https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/article/view/16453/22571; and Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[4]. For example, see Kim Bowes, *House and Society in the Later Roman Empire* (London: Bristo Classical Press, 2010); Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Luke Lavan and Michael Mulryan, eds., *The Archaeology of Late Antique "Paganism"* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Ellen Swift, "Constructing Roman Identities in Late Antiquity? Material Culture on the Western Frontier," *Late Antique Archaeology* 3, no. 1 (2006): 95-111; Ramsay MacMullen, *The Second Church: Popular Christianity, A.D. 200–400* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009); and Ann Marie Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces in the Late Antique Mediterranean: Architecture, Cult and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[5]. J. W. H. G. Liebeschuetz, ***The Decline and Fall of the Roman City*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 14; Ward-Perkins, ***Fall of Rome***; Gillett, "Rome's Fall and Europe's Rise"; and Heather, ***Fall of the Roman Empire***.