Nowhere in the late antique world were the tensions brought on by the Christianisation of the Empire more evident than in Alexandria. A volatile powder-keg, the multiple philosophical and spiritual beliefs represented within the city often came into open conflict with one another. This makes Alexandria fertile ground for exploring the interaction between the various pagan and Christian groups as well as evaluating the ways in which they adapted to the changing world in which they lived. Edward Watts does just this through a close examination of the events of a tumultuous forty-eight hours at Alexandria in 486.

The study is centred around the actions of Paralius, a teenager sent to Alexandria to receive his instruction in grammar. Unfortunately for his Neoplatonist teachers, Paralius did not find himself at ease in this classroom community and sought out his brother, the family pariah Athanasius. Athanasius was a resident of a large anti-Chalcedonian monastery on the outskirts of the city and it is here that Paralius became swayed by the resident ascetics’ objections to pagan beliefs. Emboldened by the newfound Christian logic behind his scepticism, Paralius unleashed a torrent of public criticism against his pagan teachers. This outburst aroused the fierce loyalty that his fellow students felt towards their teacher and the following day they set upon Paralius to administer the beating that was, in their eyes, a justified reaction to the insult received. However, Paralius managed to escape into a group of Christian students, setting in motion a sequence of events that saw the episode take on wider social significance. The Christian students and their ascetic affiliates interpreted Paralius’s beating as a religious persecution. When news of the outcry over Paralius’s beating reached the bishop, Peter Mongus, he adeptly manipulated events in order to gain wider popularity, a move that culminated in the destruction of the shrine of Isis. From this singular and within...
itself 'narrow conflict', Watts extrapolates to examine the traditions and interpretative frameworks that were applied by the three main communities that were involved – the pagan school, the Christian students affiliated with the monastery and the ecclesiastical institution of Alexandria (157).

After briefly describing the above episode, the book is divided into three parts that deal with each community separately. Each section places the group in question within its historical traditions and then applies this as a context to understanding its actions during 486. In the first section, which looks at the Neoplatonist traditions of the Alexandrian school, Watts contextualises Paralius's beating through an examination of philosophical traditions that reach as far back as the fourth century BCE, revealing that such scholastic customs placed loyalty to the teacher above all else. Early on in this section, Watts brings to the fore a central point that provides a thematic backbone to his anthropological approach across the rest of the book. He focuses on the importance of historical anecdotes in the formation of group identity. Such traditions are shown to provide the community with a specific value structure and model of behaviour. The broad application of this focus on group loyalties constructed through communal histories at times proves a little repetitive. However, it is perhaps a necessary burden as this interpretative model proves to be a very useful tool, providing an efficient means to reconstructing the interpretative lens through which each group reacted to Paralius's predicament.

One of the strengths of this model is the way in which Watts presents communal histories as much more of a reactive and malleable entity than Halbwachs's concept of 'collective memory' (151). This enables him not only to examine the role of such traditions in the events of 486 but also present them as a mechanism for charting the ensuing shifts in communal narrative. For example, in the second part we see how the Christian students, under the powerful influence of anti-Chalcedonian monks, perceived Paralius's beating as a religious persecution (rather than the scholastic disciplining that the Neoplatonists intended). The subsequent mobilisation of
Christian leaders against the Neoplatonists had a profound effect on the student community, providing 'a more confident historical narrative in which anti-Chalcedonian students challenged and prevailed over their pagan teachers' (146).

The real strength of this study lies in the way in which Watts, through his approach to group dynamics, is able to disentangle the complex and competing pressures of ecclesiastical, ascetic, anti-Chalcedonian and pagan traditions and reconcile them with the unique situation of the individuals involved in the events discussed. Watts is admirably cautious that the agency of the communal model he puts forward does not interfere with an appreciation of the unique circumstances of the individual and the role of personal initiative. In the third part of the book, which looks at the bishop of Alexandria's manipulation of events, Watts clearly outlines how the historical traditions and examples of past Alexandrian bishops provided Peter with a clear strategy to harness the outburst of popular energy and bend public opinion in his favour. However, we also see how the unique theological and political position of Peter led to his personal involvement being largely omitted from the historical narratives that subsequently grew up around the riot.

The episode that provides the centrepiece of the study at first seems a little brief and the reader cannot help but be a little concerned whether such a tight focus over this specific event will be able to carry interest across the length of the book. However, such concerns prove to be unfounded as Watts deftly weds a minutely detailed examination of a specific event to wider macro-history. By focusing on the use of the past in a community's self-identity Watts is very effective in succinctly outlining the unique value structures of the groups involved and how these defined their interaction. This allows Watts to reconstruct effectively a whole cross-section of the intellectual life of Alexandria with much more depth and fluidity than the two-dimensional pagan and Christian contrasts that are often put forward. He manages to reveal not just the contrasts between the competing Christian and pagan communities of the
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fifth century but also the commonalities they shared in a late antique world held together through localised and personal relationships.

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