Some of the most useful advances in the study of late antiquity in the last two decades have come from the insight that terms such as Greek, Roman, barbarian, Christian and pagan are not simple descriptors, but are sites of contestation, as individuals and groups seek to establish their own legitimacy and primacy in conflict with others. The barbarians who crossed the frontiers of the empire often quickly sought to be acknowledged as Romans; the 'Romans' opposing them reflected a wide spread of cultures, including ones which had only recently been outside imperial rule.

The twenty papers in this volume, deriving from a conference on 'Race, Religion and Culture in Late Antiquity' held in Swansea in 1998, examine this struggle for cultural and ethnic identity. Some papers focus on specific areas—for instance, Yulia Ustinova’s study of the Bosporan kingdom, which rightly questions the ascription of widespread Judaizing beliefs to the local ‘Sarmatian’ populace. Others have a much wider orbit, such as Stephen Mitchell’s survey of the decline of local languages and regional cultural variation in Asia Minor from the period of Augustus, as described by Strabo, to the restructuring of the provinces in the late Empire. A process of ‘Romanization’, assisted by the rise of Christianity, seems to have steamrollered over local identities. The continuation of this movement in the sixth century East is then explored in Geoffrey Greatrex’s paper. The parallels with the Americanisation of the modern global culture are obvious. Theresa Urbainczyk, when examining the rivalry between Greek as the language of power and native Syriac in Theodoret’s Religious History, explicitly recalls the position of English vis-à-vis Irish in modern Ireland. The strategies followed in this case obviously have much of interest to those concerned with present-day post-colonial societies, such as New Zealand where the status of bilingualism and the significance of cultural identification with a specific ethnic group continues to be hotly disputed.
Although the word ‘religion’ has been removed from the title of the published papers, the role of belief systems in shaping group identities figures prominently. Sometimes the results may appear negative. John Curran offers an excellent antidote to traditional spectacular tales of conversion by showing that, while Christianity and paganism might be portrayed as residing at different ends of the religious scale, most of the populace were clustered in the middle. Transition from one group to the other consequently required only slight adjustment, as can be seen both in times of persecution and in the rapid spread of the Church. Yet by the early Byzantine period, religious conformity had become a matter of highest state interest. Kate Adshead argues that Justinian’s conversion to the doctrine of *aphthartodocetism* (the view that the Christ had only one nature, which was divine, but maintained a free choice of accepting his fate) should not be seen as a deathbed conversion to monophysitism, but as the logical outcome of the emperor’s puritanical leanings and desire for a coherent, if intolerant expression of universal religious beliefs. Imperial hostility toward other faiths had already led to rebellion among the Samaritans, who were joined on occasion by the Jewish population. The success of the later Arab invasion was to be in no small part due to the widespread support they enjoyed from many groups branded as non-orthodox inside the boundaries of the empire. Still, Christians were not the only group to display intolerance in this period. Sacha Stern discusses the use of ‘pagan’ images in Palestinian synagogues in late antiquity, concluding that they were originally viewed as purely ornamental. It is unlikely that their defacement in the seventh century merely coincides with attacks on ornamental figures in Talmudic sources of the period. What had been indifferent was now being used, perhaps as the result of the disappearance of a living pagan culture, to assert a Jewish identity.

Throughout this collection, it is clear that cultural values and ethnicity are particularly important for the self-definition of those imposing the labels, be they members of the group being defined or outsiders. David Lambert shows how the barbarians in Salvian’s *De gubernatione Dei* had become God’s agents of punishment, in contrast with the irredeemably corrupt Romans of his day. It is unlikely that the Vandals and Goths would have viewed themselves in this fashion, any more than the sixth century Isaurians would have admitted to their regular stereotyping as bandits and construction workers. Geographical origin did not result in
common cultural values in this case, as Hugh Elton demonstrates. Indeed, an apparent indicator of group solidarity, the Isaurian regiment in the Byzantine army, turns out in fact to consist of mainly Lycaonians seeking Isaurian military prestige. For the Jews of late antiquity, the most important defining factor was their religion, but that in itself was a subject of contestation. The emergence of troublesome minim in rabbinic texts of late antiquity was a method of creating group identity by introducing an apparently coherent opposition to define Jewishness against. To outsiders, however, as Naomi Janowitz shows, Jews appeared differently, as experts in esoteric wisdom and magic—a depiction which was in turn exploited by some Jews to increase their sale of anti-demon bowls. Even the absence of opposition is revealing. As Hartwin Brandt indicates, the very absence of pagan figures in the hagiography of the Latin west shows the confidence of the Christian community in their victory. The rigid asceticism of the Christian authors had no need for pagans and paganism even as opponents—these could now be found within their own group.

The most striking treatment of ethnicity and culture appears in the two papers by John Matthews and Jill Harries on the use of Roman law in the fifth-century Visigothic kingdom of Gaul. For Matthews, the incorporation of some Roman law and traditional custom in the Code of Euric allows the strengthening of Gothic rule by setting down a legal system which was available to both Goths and Romans. For Harries, the fact that the Code was written by Romans but for Goths indicates an expropriation of Roman law, in the same way that Rome had expropriated Greek culture after conquest. Furthermore, the religious differences between Arian Goths and orthodox Romans remained, ready to be exploited by Clovis and the Franks. In response, Alaric II’s publication of his Breviarium should not be seen as simply recognising the Theodosian code and subsequent novellae, but as reinforcing Gothic dominance. The intention was to make clear to his Roman subjects that he was the final arbiter of what parts of the Code were valid, while excluding the innovations of recent eastern emperors.

The challenges posed by dual cultural and legal systems are hardly new to the inhabitants of twenty-first-century Aotearoa/New Zealand. This fascinating collection of papers shows that such problems have been
seen before and that examination of the past may have as much to offer in suggesting solutions as the latest managerial theories.

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