
The risk in an edited volume arising from a conference is that the papers will seem disparate in retrospect. The sense of unity which is given by occasion does not always survive the passage of time and the transition to the printed page. On the whole, however, *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Brown* avoids this danger. Despite the broad rubric of its title, most of the papers focus upon Neoplatonic philosophers, giving the collection coherence, and ensuring that the same issues, texts and personalities are fruitfully examined from a number of different angles. The volume succeeds in its laudable goal, ‘to bring together philosophers and historians’ (vii), without the expected dichotomous results. Most of the papers work well together and speak to each other. The consequence is a useful and illuminating collection.

The theme which emerges most vividly from it is the complexity and diversity of Neoplatonism itself. As Robin Lane Fox justly notes, ‘we cannot lump all these Platonist philosophers under one “Neoplatonist” label and expect to find only one “Neoplatonist” attitude to public affairs’ (25). This sentiment is either echoed or demonstrated by a number of other contributors. Robbert van den Berg illustrates the different ways in which the tension between desire for contemplation and the urge for practical action played itself out in the lives and works of philosophers. Richard Sorabji explores the multiple strands of Neoplatonic theurgic practice and the ongoing disagreements between Athenian and Alexandrian schools of thought. Karin Alt reveals the complexity of Neoplatonic attitudes towards *daimones* and their influence on humanity, and Lane Fox’s own contribution hinges on the options faced by Neoplatonists in an increasingly Christian world: to engage with and challenge it (‘the shakers’) or to flee (‘the movers’). No single picture of ‘the philosopher in society’ emerges from the collection, but this is a strength rather than a source of confusion, reflecting as it does the range of interactions in the late antique world.

The volume also provides welcome reminders of philosophical practicalities. These come in the form of John Dillon’s shrewd
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observations on how the schools functioned, and how their masters supported themselves, and in Edward Watts’ portrait of the religiously mixed and surprisingly fluid student environments in Alexandria and Beirut. They also come in accounts of how philosophical ideals were translated into practical advice. Alexandrine Schniewind insists that far from being elitist, Plotinus’ works were ‘primarily directed towards the ordinary person’ (52), while Dominic J. O’Meara demonstrates how Sopatros used his philosophical training as the basis for a practical ethics of rulership, in his letter to Himerios. Both Andrew Smith and Garth Fowden illustrate, moreover, that even where sages expressed a wish to withdraw from the public stage, this was ultimately neither feasible nor desirable. The philosopher was a part of late antique society whether he wished it or not, and many made the most of the opportunities presented to them.

A few of the pieces fit less comfortably within the collection. Very little attention is paid to Christianity except as an antagonistic force, with the result that Aideen Hartney’s discussion of John Chrysostom strikes a jarring note. Although interesting, it is not clear that this paper belongs with the others, or that the term ‘philosopher’ could not be replaced throughout with ‘ascetic’, and carry equivalent analytic force. Mark Edwards’ account of two Christianisation ‘incidents’, focusing on Zosimus of Panopolis and the violence in Gaza, feels similarly misplaced. The contribution of Polymnia Athanassiadi, meanwhile, on Apamea and the Chaldean oracles, bears only passing reference to the volume’s themes and Lane Fox’s appendix-attack on Tardieu’s thesis about the seven philosophers in Harran forms an odd conclusion. These are but minor discordances, however, within an otherwise well integrated whole.

It is perhaps churlish to point up omissions within an essay collection, but some warrant notice. Not only do Christianity and Christian wise or holy men get short shrift, as already noted, but Augustine also is strikingly absent. All had more presence in the original conference schedule, but have fallen by the wayside subsequently. This is unfortunate and surprising, especially in a collection dedicated to Peter Brown. It points, however, to an even larger silence. Despite the fact that the volume claims to be in honour of Brown, only Lane Fox offers any sustained engagement with his work.
Many contributors do not mention or refer to him in the entire course of their papers, and only one cites the published talk (Peter Brown, *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity*, Center for Hermeneutical Studies, Protocol series of the colloquies 34 [Berkeley, 1980]) after which the collection is presumably named. Brown’s argument in that piece, that philosophers were the ‘saints’ of classical culture, would have provided a provocative basis for discussion, while his comments on the differing social stances of philosophers and ascetics seem a useful reference point, especially for those papers which do address Christianity. Instead, however, inspiration is apparently confined to a general sense that Brown has ‘done so much to illuminate the world of late antiquity’ (vii). Fair comment, but a seemingly insufficient basis for the dedication of a volume.

An additional consequence of this largely generalised inspiration is that no one engages with or challenges Brown’s argument that Christian sages, unlike their pagan counterparts, consciously addressed their philosophy to ‘the masses’ (Peter Brown, ‘Late Antiquity’ in Paul Veyne (ed.), *A History of Private Life. 1. From Pagan Rome to Byzantium* [Cambridge, MA, 1987], 248). Indeed, while the intended audiences of Neoplatonic thinkers are convincingly demonstrated to be wider than often thought, there is very little focus on their actual audiences. Fowden raises a central question: for all of their apparent commitment to cult, city, society and politics, ‘outside the charmed circle of philosophers, did anyone else notice’ (158)? Fowden gives a rapid affirmative answer, and Schniewind indirectly argues the same, but few other contributors address the issue at all. I remain to be convinced that Neoplatonic ideas had as wide an impact as their adherents claimed for them. Far more resonant to my mind is Edwards’ image of the philosophers as social outcasts and occasional objects of ridicule. I am sceptical always of the claims made by modern intellectuals for the ‘profound effect’ of intellectuals in ancient societies (215).

That said, however, this is an important and provocative collection, which addresses a perennial issue. It is stimulating to a scholar of the late antique Church to see pagan philosophers struggling with the same issues of withdrawal and engagement as their Christian counterparts—torn between fear of contamination by the world and
profound sensations of responsibility towards it. The papers give an intimate impression of an intellectual environment which is both vibrant and vulnerable at the same time. This in itself contributes enormously to our appreciation of the society in which these philosophers lived.

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