Riot in Alexandria: Tradition and Group Dynamics in Late Antique Pagan and Christian Communities (review)

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evocatively described as the ballast for ships returning from Rome or the marble of Proconnesus coming out of Constantinople were not a valueless return for the goods and services coming into the capitals, for they literally served to construct the empire in the remotest regions of the Mediterranean (e.g., Gianfrotta 2010; Guiglia and Guidobaldi 1992). On a related note, Van Dam’s thesis regarding the supply of Rome and increased agricultural production in the provinces would have benefited from reference to Monte Testaccio, the man-made “eighth hill” of ancient Rome that consists of fragments of the amphorae used to transport olive oil from southern Spain to the imperial metropolis between the reign of Augustus and Gallienus (Rodriguez-Almeida 1984). Similarly, Van Dam’s observation that there was “not enough history” for Constantinople in the city’s first centuries is shrewd and can be pushed further. It is good to remark that St. Paul failed to pass through Byzantium (51–52), but something far more fundamental is involved. The ecclesiastical disputes of the fourth and fifth centuries were exacerbated by the fact that Constantinople—unlike Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch—did not have a readily available apostolic tradition to invoke for authority when pronouncing on theological issues. Performing a function analogous to that of the genealogies of heroes and rulers within the Greco-Roman world, apostolic succession was an essential element in the arguments of those purporting to defend orthodoxy.

The format of published lectures, even in this “expanded” version, does have consequences. The introduction is brief and the volume lacks a formal summation, even though the last section (“Rain”) of the second chapter might well have constituted an autonomous conclusion to the whole work. Thus, the organization somewhat undermines the force of Van Dam’s message. On the other hand, author and publisher are to be congratulated for providing plans of Rome and Constantinople that use the same scale. In sum, then, Ray Van Dam has written an attractive if slim volume that manages to say a great deal within its brief compass. This extended pair of essays will not only be of use in the classroom and of interest to the general public, but also serve to stimulate debate amongst colleagues. Learned, but accessible, Rome and Constantinople thus fills a long-standing gap in the literature.

Riot in Alexandria: Tradition and Group Dynamics in Late Antique Pagan and Christian Communities

Edward J. Watts

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In the opening scene of the 2009 film Agora, the philosopher Hypatia lectures to her students on the beauties of the Ptolemaic universe; in the concluding scene, Cyril’s henchmen stone her before a Christian altar. The vignettes bookend a plot cribbed from Socrates, Sozomen, and Rufinus. The film merely inverts the polarity of the ecclesiastical historians’ narrative, as the irenic Hypatia, dressed in white, struggles to preserve classical rationality in the face of the machinations of a swarthy, black-clad Cyril.
The film’s marked dichromatism mirrors that of the ancient literary texts on which it is based. The characters’ lack of subtlety and the monolithic conflict between pagan classicism and Christian asceticism that drives the plot all make for what is, in effect, a rather faithful film adaptation of early Christian accounts of the sacking of the Serapeum. Only the polarity is reversed; we are asked to identify with the tragic Hypatia rather than with the righteous triumph of a demon-fighting Cyril.

I begin this review of Edward Watts’s new monograph with this summary of *Agora* because it reiterates what remains a durable narrative of “Christianization.” The film also stands as a foil to Watts’s work. Both the film and the book cover much of the same historical territory and draw on many of the same literary sources. Watts’s book, though, adds a new dimension to the story of the late ancient “culture wars.” Rather than offering a grand narrative of cultural and religious conflict in Alexandria, the book is a microhistory: an intense analysis of “a long weekend in the spring of 486” (254). Watts provides the basic narrative in his first, introductory chapter: a student, Paralius, began to frequent the company of monks from Enaton monastery who were critical of his pagan teachers; Paralius was beaten by fellow students after challenging the authority of his (pagan) teacher, Horapollon; a group of Christian students together with monks from the Enaton appealed to the archbishop, Peter Mongus, who then seized upon the “persecution” of Paralius to lead his congregation to sack a shrine of Isis in the suburb of Menouthis. This brief summary belies the density of Watts’s microhistory, which he explores in three discrete, but interconnected, sets of chapters.

The first set of chapters examines the ways in which written and oral traditions helped define collective identity among groups of students and teachers. These histories also served as vehicles for instilling paradigmatic models of behavior—including, Watts stresses, the value of defending the tradition and its masters against critics. The most engaging part of this section explores the ways that invitations to dinner and other private settings beyond the classroom served to establish intimate bonds between teachers and select student favorites. Students like Paralius, who were left outside these close-knit circles, might look elsewhere for a sense of community and belonging. Paralius was not a Christian before coming to Alexandria, and he may have looked to the monks at the Enaton monastery, Watts suggests, in part because he never became fully bonded to Horapollon’s circle.

Finally, the section examines Damascius’ *Life of Isidore* (written thirty to forty years after the Paralius-incident) to gauge the long-term effects of the Paralius incident on the collective memory of Neoplatonic communities. The unrest surrounding Paralius’ beating and the sacking of the Isis shrine was followed by a formal investigation of Alexandria’s Neoplatonic teachers and a temporary closure of the schools. This marked a time of ethical crisis among Neoplatonists that began with their support of Illus’ revolt in 484. The failed revolt and the Paralius riot bookended a period in which Neoplatonists wrestled between cultural accommodation and resistance. The *Life of Isidore*, Watts contends, presents Isidore’s self-imposed exile in
the face of Christian pressures (first to Athens and later beyond the Roman Empire) as a “new normal” of Neoplatonic political ethics. This was an ethics that, Watts suggests, further contributed to the end of the institutionalized Neoplatonic succession.

Part 2 explores the role of oral traditions and literary traditions in inculcating an ascetic “school spirit” among monks and their lay associates. Watts shows that, in practice, boundaries between monks and the “world” were permeable and open, as lay people and ecclesiastics developed various levels of relationships with ascetic masters. At the same time, monastic communities cultivated oral and written traditions that insisted on exclusivity and loyalty. For ascetic circles, in other words, hagiography and sayings texts served to preserve and inculcate collective memory and ethical norms just as bios-literature did for the Neoplatonic schools.

In this portion of the book, Watts also brings to life a “new” late ancient character—the student-philoponoi, young men enrolled in traditional schools but having close ties to ascetic masters as well. Watts describes and analyzes the intense social pressures with which student-philoponoi contended. The philoponoi were neither monks nor clerics and constantly negotiated their interstitial position between monastic anachôrēsis and the pressures of “the world.” Paralius, for instance, came from a well-educated pagan family; when he found it hard to fit in among Horapolon’s students he turned to his brother Athanasius, who had been estranged from their pagan family after joining the Enaton monastery. Watts also describes how the monk (and former sophist), Stephen, served as the Christian students’ main contact within the Enaton monastery. Watts thus successfully humanizes his subjects without romanticizing them; he shows, rather, how the broader social dynamics rippling through late ancient schools were constituted out of personal, intimate relationships such as these.

Part 3 examines the role of Alexandrian patriarch Peter Mongus in the Paralius incident. Watts draws on a variety of sources, ranging from Gregory Nazianzen and Rufinus to the seventh-century historian John of Nikiu to identify two dominant discursive possibilities for Alexandrian bishops. On the one hand, Athanasius came to offer a model of authority based on the defense of orthodoxy and patient resistance to persecution. On the other hand, Theophilus’ collaboration with imperial authorities to close and despoil temples presented the bishop as anti-pagan champion of the city and its people. Peter Mongus found himself in the difficult position of trying to establish rapprochement between anti-Chalcedonian and pro-Chalcedonian factions in Alexandria while simultaneously working to find the good graces of the Chalcedonian emperor Zeno. The Paralius incident provided an opportunity for Peter to exploit both traditions of Alexandrian bishops. In the aftermath of the riot, Peter cast himself as an Athanasian leader of persecuted Christians. Simultaneously, he orchestrated a Theophilean temple-sacking that would rally both anti- and pro-Chalcedonians.

Like Agora and the ecclesiastical historians, the book has its denouement in an archbishop’s scheming, anti-pagan violence, and the decline of the Neoplatonic diadochē. But rewriting the meta-narrative of “Christianization” is not Watts’s aim. Instead, the book shows, first, how literary texts (hagiographies, philosophical bioi, and so forth)
functioned together with orally transmitted stories to shape and enshrine the collective memories of both Christian and Neoplatonic intellectual circles. Secondly, the microhistories he explores reveal the often heretofore unseen and unappreciated personal relationships in which these collective memories were transmitted and subsisted. This book is also of great value because it assembles a new constellation of texts not usually studied together. All students and scholars of Late Antiquity should note that such a textured history only emerges out of a bibliography that sets Neoplatonic commentaries alongside ascetic hagiographies and includes works in Greek, Coptic, and Syriac. Consequently, the book would make for especially productive reading in any graduate course aimed at generating interdisciplinary conversations among students of early Christianity, ancient philosophy, and ancient history.

Also Noted

The End of Dialogue in Antiquity
SIMON GOLDFILL, ed.
Pp. viii + 266. $99

This volume contains the following articles of interest to scholars of Late Antiquity: Gillian Clark, “Can We Talk?: Augustine and the Possibility of Dialogue”; Richard Miles, “‘Let’s (Not) Talk about It’: Augustine and the Control of Epistolary Dialogue”; Richard Lim, “Christians, Dialogues and Patterns of Sociability in Late Antiquity”; Kate Cooper, Matthew Dal Santo, “Boethius, Gregory the Great and the Christian ‘Afterlife’ of Classical Dialogue.”

Growing up Fatherless in Antiquity
SABINE R. HÜBNER, DAVID M. RATZAN, eds.
Pp. xvi + 333. $110.

This volume contains the following articles of interest to scholars of Late Antiquity: Raffaela Cribiore, “The Education of Orphans: A Reassessment of the Evidence of Libanius”; Geoffrey Nathan, “‘Woe to Those Making Widows their Prey and Robbing the Fatherless’: Christian Ideals and the Obligations of Stepfathers in Late Antiquity.”