

## THE NEEDLE'S EYE: WEALTH AND WESTERN SOCIETY FROM THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE TO THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Alexander Skinner, University of Birmingham & Cardiff University

(SkinnerAG@cardiff.ac.uk)

Abstract: This review article discusses Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550AD* (pp. xxx + 759, 16 col. plates; Princeton University Press; Princeton, NJ, 2012). Following an overall view of the book (I), this essay makes observations about the handling of late Roman social structures (II), about the implications of the geographical emphases of the book (III) and about the implications of the judgments it offers on the chronology of the transition from late antiquity to the early middle ages (IV). This essay also comments on literary methods and their role in Brown's exposition (V) and offers a concluding reflection on the kind of historical craftsmanship exemplified by the book (VI).

### I

Peter Brown's *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550AD*, is by any standard a major achievement.<sup>1</sup> Elegantly written and amply sign-posted, this long book is a pleasure to read. It is marked by a sustained effort to keep late Roman ideas about wealth firmly grounded in the social structures and sheer contingency of the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries. Perhaps the central ambition of Brown's career, restated in his Preface, has been to treat religious history in full relation to its social setting.<sup>2</sup> For two reasons, he has realized that aim more completely in this book than ever before. First, *Through the Eye of a Needle* incorporates Brown's most autonomous

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550AD* (Princeton, NJ, 2012) – hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *TEN*.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Brown, 'A Life of Learning', Charles Homer Haskins Lecture for 2003, ACLS Occasional Paper No. 55, 6: 'I did not conceive of my biography of Augustine as a contribution only to the religious history of late antiquity. Far from it. *Religion and Society in the Age of Augustine* (the title of the first collection of my articles) was somewhat of a *cri de guerre* for me: it was the slogan for an entire academic enterprise. Religion without Society interested me not in the least.' *TEN*, xxvi: 'I was determined not to keep separate the history of the religion and culture of the later empire from the history of its society.'

observations so far about late Roman social structures. Secondly, he has not only put religion and society together but has given us a study yet more fully ‘in the round’. Insofar as they are relevant to his main topic of the giving of wealth, he has sought to intertwine the political, economic and cultural dimensions of the period.

Hence one understands when the author confesses to having found this ‘the most difficult book to write that I have ever undertaken’.<sup>3</sup> An obvious comparator, *The Body and Society*, showed a pyrotechnic command of sources in Greek, Syriac and Coptic as well as Latin.<sup>4</sup> Yet the chasm between didactic texts and day-to-day sexual life had already been sombrelly acknowledged by Brown in his contribution to a major Francophone project on the history of private life.<sup>5</sup> The reality of sexual life remains, for obvious reasons, an uncommonly challenging matter to investigate.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, in his Preface to *Through the Eye of a Needle*, Brown is more defensive than he need be. He offers a methodological apologia for the use of writings by highly intellectual authors, quoting Louis Gernet on classical Greek religion: “‘An elite does not invent. It renders explicit what many others think.’”<sup>7</sup> In itself, this has its limits. One need not deny Gernet’s point entirely to say that social stratification remains highly relevant to the history of culture and religion, albeit on more sophisticated terms than we used to think.<sup>8</sup> But the apologia is hardly necessary because Brown so rarely takes it for granted in this book. The range of

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<sup>3</sup> *TEN*, xxvi.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Peter Brown, ‘Late Antiquity’, in Paul Veyne (ed.), *A History of Private Life, Vol. I: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 234-311, at 294-311, especially 304-5 and 309-10. Originally published as ‘Antiquité tardive’, in Paul Veyne (ed.), *Histoire de la vie Privée, tome I: De l’Empire romain à l’an mil* (Paris, 1985), 226-99.

<sup>6</sup> Adultery: Hagith Sivan, ‘Le corps d’une pécheresse, le prix de la piété: la politique de l’adultère dans l’Antiquité tardive’, *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 53 (1998), 231-253. Prostitution: Thomas A. J. McGinn, ‘The Legal Definition of Prostitute in Late Antiquity’, *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 42 (1997), 73-116. Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), passim, brings welcome attention to the overall importance of prostitution; but we now need a study of its continuity, and some estimate of the degree of its diminution, in the face of moral and legal change. General: for the evidence of papyrology on a range of behaviour, see especially Roger S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ, 1993), 188-99.

<sup>7</sup> *TEN*, xxiii-xxiv, quoting (at p.xxiv) Louis Gernet, *Le génie grec dans la religion* (Paris, 1932), 370. Cf. Brown’s critique of a “‘two-tiered” model’ of religion in Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, IL, 1981), especially ch.1.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Gemeinhardt, ‘Volksfrömmigkeit in der spätantiken Hagiographie. Potential und Grenzen eines umstrittenen Konzepts’, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 110 (2013), 410-438; and, implicitly, Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Ville Vuolanto, ‘Children and Agency: Religion as Socialisation in Late Antiquity and the Late Medieval West’, *Childhood in the Past* 4 (2011), 79-99. See also, from another angle, John R. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100BC-AD315* (Berkeley, CA, 2003); and John R. Clarke, *Looking at Laughter: Humor, Power, and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture, 100BC-AD250* (Berkeley, CA, 2007), especially chs.6-7.

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evidence he marshals is striking for its catholicity. His discussions gain considerably from a delightful dexterity at integrating different types of sources – above all when highly charged, intellectual texts are regularly earthed in social structures and archaeological discoveries.

Though Brown is reticent of saying so, this book is not least an abiding reminder that the Augustinianism of later western centuries has its roots in the fragile circumstantiality of an age in which Augustine was simply one voice among many. In marginally different circumstances, a significantly different medieval Catholicism could easily have developed. Brown allows a sense of the contingent to emerge for itself. What this might mean, for the giant weight of a religious tradition, is a question that the author wisely leaves to the convictions of the reader.

What Brown does want to make plain is that the reorientation he traces, in the social value and use of wealth, amounts to a fundamental change in the human imagination and experience, which we can link with the end of antiquity itself. The pressure of Church wealth and lay donors:

... hastened the great turn toward the other world that has been held to mark the end of the ancient world and the beginning of the middle ages. Led by a clergy made ever more starkly different from themselves in culture and lifestyle, the laity sought out new ways to place their wealth beyond the grave for the salvation of their souls. ... wealth for the church and for the poor had become wealth for the dead.<sup>9</sup>

Hence the curious disparities in the structure of the book. Parts II and III (covering just two generations from 370 to 430) account for about sixty per cent of the text and notes. At heart, this is a book about the way in which an evolving range of attitudes to wealth in the late fourth century, mainly in Italy, would be overshadowed by a dramatic turn of circumstances. The world of Symmachus, Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola and the Christian community of fourth-century Rome – full of divergent and creative possibilities – gives way to a new dichotomy. The blockade and sack of Rome by Alaric's army, culminating in 410, would give unexpected prominence to a fault-line in Christian views.<sup>10</sup> A debate would be triggered in Africa between refugees of Pelagian hue and a well-rooted nexus of African attitudes concerning regular, expiatory giving. The possibilities inherent in the spectrum of ideas (both traditional and innovative) which had found expression

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<sup>9</sup> *TEN*, 530.

<sup>10</sup> On the events of 408-10, see Peter Heather, *Goths and Romans, 332-489* (Oxford, 1991), 213-18. See also Mischa Meier and Steffen Patzold, *August 410 – Ein Kampf um Rom* (Stuttgart, 2010). On the immediate reaction of Augustine to the sack, see now Michele Renee Salzman, 'Christian Sermons Against Pagans: The Evidence from Augustine's *Sermons* on the New Year and on the Sack of Rome in 410', in Michael Maas (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila* (Cambridge, 2015), 344-57, at 353-7.

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in the late fourth century would be eclipsed over time by the dominance of this debate.<sup>11</sup> In light of how ground-breaking several of Brown's subjects clearly were – notably Ambrose, Paulinus and the radical Pelagian author of *De Divitiis* – it is striking that, on wealth, Augustine emerges as a rather conventional African bishop of basically pragmatic horizons. Notwithstanding the rich context Brown gives it, Augustine's assault on Pelagian views (both on free will and on renunciation of wealth) has more than a whiff of regional particularism and vested interest.<sup>12</sup>

By contrast, Parts I, IV and V range across the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries. Amounting to about 260 pages of text and notes, these parts exemplify Brown's gift for covering wide territory in a short compass.<sup>13</sup> They frame his close study of two generations by providing a panoramic treatment of the social world of his principal actors and windows onto subsequent generations. In less able hands, the changes of pace involved in this structure might have led the book to lose coherence. But Brown constantly sign-posts his intentions as he moves between sections, chapters and parts – even adapting the novelist's technique of the 'cliff-hanger' by ending his chapters with a hint of where the next will take us.

Overall, *Through the Eye of a Needle* is also a firm reminder of where Brown himself began. Reading in 1955 for his undergraduate Special Subject on the 'Age of Augustine', Brown found his way into the late empire through Henri-Irénée Marrou and André Piganiol. By 1958, having avoided an expectation that he should do research on late medieval bishops, Brown had examined late Roman artwork in Italy and read Santo Mazzarino.<sup>14</sup> The main landscapes and *dramatis personae* of Parts II and III of *Through the Eye of a Needle* were central to his first book, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, and to many of his first dozen essays collected

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<sup>11</sup> For a further indication of the fluidity and polarization of ideas, see Stuart Squires, 'Jerome on Sinlessness: A *Via Media* Between Augustine and Pelagius', *Heythrop Journal*, doi: 10.1111/heyj.12063 (2013) – print version forthcoming. The major study of Julian of Eclanum is Josef Lössl, *Julian von Aeclanum: Studien zu seinem Leben, seinem Werk, seiner Lehre und ihrer Überlieferung* (Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 60, Leiden, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> *TEN*, chs.20-23. That Augustine was nonetheless able, at the height of controversy, to foreground pastoral care in his correspondence, is emphasized in Pierre Descotes, 'Saint Augustin et la crise pélagienne: le témoignage de la correspondance (Epistulae 186, 187 et 194)', *Revue d'Etudes Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 56 (2010), 197-227.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity* (Cambridge, MA, forthcoming 2015) promises to extend the author's discussion of the fourth- to sixth-century West.

<sup>14</sup> Undergraduate special subject: Peter Brown, 'Report', in Brown *et. al.*, 'SO Debate: The World of Late Antiquity Revisited', *Symbolae Osloenses* 72 (1997), 5-30, at 10. Expectation of late medieval research avoided: Brown, 'Life of Learning', 5-6. Travelling in Italy: Peter Brown, 'Elites in Late Antiquity', *Arethusa* 33 (2000), 321-46, at 321. Reading Mazzarino and lecturing in 1958 under his influence: Brown, 'Report', 13, with Peter Brown, 'What's in a Name? A talk given at the opening of Oxford Centre for Late Antiquity on Friday 28 September 2007', [http://www.oxla.ox.ac.uk/pdf/brown\\_what\\_in\\_name.pdf](http://www.oxla.ox.ac.uk/pdf/brown_what_in_name.pdf) (last accessed 19 November 2014), 12pp, at p.1.

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in *Religion and Society in the Age of St Augustine*.<sup>15</sup> It is a credit both to scholarship in general and to Brown individually that his coverage of this material, some half a century later, is remarkably fresh. The subject matter has evolved substantially; and it shows a deep mastery of the territory that each 'portrait in a landscape' is beautifully drawn and presented with immense assurance. There is a ceaseless empathy with each subject. Students and teachers will undoubtedly profit from the fact that each portrait can be studied in isolation. Together, they open up a diverse world in flux.

That there are ways in which one can take issue with *Through the Eye of a Needle* is only natural. Occasional improbabilities of argument, even errors of fact, are hard to avoid in a wide-ranging work, though obvious infelicities are in this case exiguous. The scale and sophistication of presentation defy easy summary, yet each stage of exposition is lucid and well-placed, and the overall argument (once one steps back) has an elegant simplicity. Criticism must focus, therefore, on the terms on which the book succeeds. With this in mind, I shall consider aspects of Brown's handling of social structures (II), his chosen geography (III) and his views on periodization (IV). As literary technique is an important element in Brown's method of exposition, I also enter some observations on style (V) before offering a brief conclusion on the kind of history with which we are dealing (VI).

## II

The first individual to appear in Brown's first chapter is the Harvester of Mactar, in Roman Africa. This man of unknown name rose from farm labouring to being a foreman, then a freeholder and then a member of the local aristocracy as a councillor and office-holder.<sup>16</sup> What is striking, however, is the particular weight and character which Brown gives to the line that the Harvester eventually crossed:

By joining the town council, our 'Harvester' crossed the most significant social threshold in the Roman world. This was not the modern threshold between poverty and wealth. It was the all-important, Roman threshold between facelessness and 'honors'. ... Our Harvester was probably not notably richer than many of the *rusticuli* among whom he grew up. ... But the 'honors' associated with membership in the town council of Mactar placed him (and would certainly have placed his descendants had he succeeded) within sight of the very top of Roman society.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London, 1967; new ed. 2000); Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of St Augustine* (London, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> *TEN*, 3-6; *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* 7457; translated in Tim G. Parkin and Arthur J. Pomeroy (eds), *Roman Social History: A Sourcebook* (London, 2007), 39-40.

<sup>17</sup> *TEN*, 4, 6.

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The present reviewer must declare an interest, having arrived independently at much the same conclusion about council membership.<sup>18</sup> The corollary, however, is that one ought to be rather more meticulous than historians sometimes have been in one's treatment of 'mobility'. Becoming a councillor was a decisive case of social mobility. Conversely, the aristocratic stratum of the imperial population, from poor councillor to great senator, can be estimated (immediate families included) at a mere one per cent of the population. Movement *within* that tiny bracket cannot be described as 'social mobility' without bending the term out of all sociological relevance. I have suggested elsewhere that, for the ups and downs of persons within the aristocratic percentile, we should instead think in terms of 'political mobility'.<sup>19</sup> But the argument needs extending to the shape of late Roman economic mobility as well. As Brown points out, to rise from higher plebeian status into the council did not require much economic movement. A rich plebeian and a poor councillor were much the same in terms of wealth. But the obverse of this is that there was a phenomenal curve of economic mobility *within* the aristocratic percentile. Hence the paradox of late Roman social, economic and political structures is that major economic mobility was not linked to social mobility in any meaningful sense (as aristocratic status was merely a prerequisite) but was instead linked chiefly to political advantage within the governing class. Local aristocrats in Brown's 'age of gold' always had the potential to find themselves caught in an ugly cock-fight.<sup>20</sup>

Brown is particularly good when gravitating to the swathe of middle and lesser provincial aristocratic society, and to the higher plebeians on the cusp of council membership – the latter being an important recruiting ground for the Christian clergy.<sup>21</sup> This is a history which cannot be written from the exalted pages of the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*.<sup>22</sup> 'The tendency', he remarks, 'to look at only the very top of late Roman society has created a more than usually tenacious stereotype. ... We have allowed ourselves to assume that fourth-century society was dominated without exception by a class of great landowners such as we imagine Petronius Probus to have been.'<sup>23</sup> To avoid such a focus, Brown has mined the archaeological reports on the villa society of the late Roman West and found himself persuaded by the continuing tenacity, in the late empire, of a significant

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<sup>18</sup> Alexander Skinner, 'Political Mobility in the Later Roman Empire', *Past and Present* 218 (2013), 17-53, at 32-7, especially 33.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-7.

<sup>20</sup> *TEN*, ch.1, especially 23-6.

<sup>21</sup> *TEN*, ch.2 *passim*, 81, 127, 171; Claire Sotinel, 'Les évêques italiens dans la société de l'Antiquité tardive: L'émergence d'une nouvelle élite?' in Rita Lizzi Testa (ed.), *Le trasformazioni delle "élites" in età tardoantica* (Rome, 2006), 377-404.

<sup>22</sup> A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale and J. Morris (eds), *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* (3 vols, Cambridge, 1971-92), focusing on higher equestrians and senators.

<sup>23</sup> *TEN*, 18. Alan Cameron, 'Polyonomy in the Late Roman Aristocracy: the Case of Petronius Probus', *Journal of Roman Studies* 75 (1985), 164-82, remains an excellent point of departure on this individual.

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stratum of well-to-do, but not super-rich, provincial landowners.<sup>24</sup> He has a delightful eye for the ways in which this provincial gentry articulated their status, not only through the design of their villas but through their dress sense and even the ornamentation of their pepper pots.<sup>25</sup> Further on, the chapter on the world of Ausonius provides a superb vignette, and can serve as an excellent point of departure for the study of late Roman gentry culture.<sup>26</sup>

For this very reason, however, the social and economic structure of the Roman senatorial aristocracy is an area on which one wishes Brown's judgments had been more critical. We are, unavoidably in a book on late Roman wealth, given Olympiodorus' well-known figures for the thousands of pounds of gold which some western senators at Rome claimed to have earned and spent. But how 'grateful' should we really be for Olympiodorus' figures? And do they warrant the term 'statistics'? Brown acknowledges that 'the credibility of these huge sums hangs on a slender thread' (citing Walter Scheidel) but then allows the working assumption (citing Wickham) that Olympiodorus' figures 'were not either grossly exaggerated or garbled'.<sup>27</sup> This is a slip – albeit one that is widely shared in late Roman studies. Olympiodorus was in no position to scrutinize financial accounts. His information, so far as one can tell, was dinner-table gossip written up for his Greek-speaking audience as a tale of wonder. What anyone who rehearses Olympiodorus' figures as evidence of senatorial wealth really needs to do is to provide, alongside, the cautionary tale of Ammianus Marcellinus:

Alii nullo quaerente vultus severitate adsimulata patrimonia sua in inensum extollunt, cultorum ut puta feracium multiplicantes annuos fructus, quae a primo ad ultimum solem se abunde iactitant possidere, ...

Others again, with an appearance of deep gravity, hold forth unasked on the immense extent of their family property, multiplying in imagination the annual produce of their fertile lands, which extend, they boastfully declare, from farthest east to farthest west.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *TEN*, 18-25.

<sup>25</sup> *TEN*, 27-30.

<sup>26</sup> *TEN*, ch.12.

<sup>27</sup> *TEN*, 16, citing Olympiodorus, *Fragments* 41.1-2, ed. and trans. R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus, II: Text, Translation and Historiographical Notes* (Liverpool, 1983), 204-6; Walter Scheidel, 'Finances, Figures and Fiction', *Classical Quarterly* 46 (1996), 222-38; and Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (London, 2009), 29. Cf. Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800* (Oxford, 2005), 162-3.

<sup>28</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*, 14.6.10; trans. Walter Hamilton in Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire (AD354-378)* (London, 1986), 47.

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All in all, it is too easy to exaggerate about the Romans of Rome. ‘In the newly reconstituted elite of the empire’, Brown tells us, ‘the nobles of Rome represented Old Money. Many noble families reached back for centuries.’<sup>29</sup> But how many and how far back? Most claims of ancient lineage were bogus. And most senators in the fourth century arrived at Rome in much the same way as eastern senators arrived at Constantinople: by adlection, in recognition of imperial service.<sup>30</sup> Something that *PLRE* does suggest, as did Keith Hopkins, is that survival within the senatorial stratum over three generations was in fact a rarity.<sup>31</sup> Wickham suggests that ‘[i]t would be wrong to try to locate Melania [the Younger] ... too tightly inside Olympiodorus’ hierarchies of wealth, but the scales are analogous.’<sup>32</sup> In fact, sheer staying power will almost certainly have placed both her and Pinianus at a pinnacle. Four generations back, Melania’s family could boast a praetorian prefect and consul.<sup>33</sup> Pinianus was the son of a Prefect of Rome, who is himself likely to have had a distinguished lineage.<sup>34</sup> If the 1,600-1,700 pounds of gold in annual income mentioned by Gerontius, Melania’s biographer, is any guide at all (and it might also be unreliable) then the ‘many’ senators whom Olympiodorus tells us were accruing as much as 4,000 per annum in cash were busy proving Ammianus right.<sup>35</sup> In fact, one would need to multiply even the unusually high income Gerontius mentions by some two and a half times to meet Olympiodorus’ figure.

These observations simply reinforce Brown’s emphasis on the importance of looking, even in the West, at the provincial aristocracies and at the texture of local life. We might still be some distance away from being able to write a coherent history of the late Roman peasantry. But we are in a position to bring the history of the late Roman gentry much closer to the centre of our attention, and even, increasingly, to consider the wealthier plebeians from whom new members of each local aristocracy would be recruited.

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<sup>29</sup> *TEN*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> F. Jacques, ‘L’ordine senatorio attraverso la crisi del III secolo’, in A. Giardina (ed.), *Società romana e impero tardoantico, vol. 1: Istituzioni, ceti, economie* (Rome, 1986), 96–108, esp. 99–101, makes a more or less persuasive case for perhaps twenty late imperial clans dating back to before the mid-second century. Still valuable are several studies by Chastagnol: André Chastagnol, ‘Les modes de recrutement du Sénat au IVe siècle ap. J.-C.’, in Claude Nicolet (ed.), *Recherches sur les structures sociales dans L’Antiquité classique: Caen 25–26 avril* (Paris, 1970), 187–211; André Chastagnol, ‘L’évolution de l’ordre sénatorial au IIIe et IVe siècles de notre ère’, *Revue historique* 244 (1970), 305–44; André Chastagnol, ‘La carrière sénatorial du Bas-Empire (depuis Dioclétien)’, *Tituli* 4 (1982), 167–94; and André Chastagnol, ‘Remarques sur les sénateurs orientaux au IVe siècle’, *Acta Antiqua Hungaricae* 24 (1976), 341–56.

<sup>31</sup> Keith Hopkins, *Death and Renewal* (Sociological Studies in Roman History, vol. 2, Cambridge, 1983), 126–46.

<sup>32</sup> Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, 162.

<sup>33</sup> *PLRE* 1, 548–9 (Antonius Marcellinus 16); 592–3 (Melania 1, the elder); 593 (Melania 2, the younger).

<sup>34</sup> *PLRE* 1, 702 (Valerius Pinianus 2); 837 (Valerius Severus 29); 1142, 1147 (stemmata 20, 30).

<sup>35</sup> Gerontius, *Life of Melania*, 15; n. 27 above for Olympiodorus.

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## III

Brown acknowledges that his choice of geographical focus presents a question in itself:

It is poignantly easy to imagine an alternative history of the churches in the Roman West. I frequently ask myself what this history would have looked like if, for example, a writer of the manifold activities of Augustine of Hippo had emerged in southern Spain or beside the Danube; if the bishops of Trier had been the subject of a collective biography like the *Liber Pontificalis* – *Book of the Pontiffs* – of Rome; or if the shrine of Saint Alban (at Verulamium, Saint Albans) in southern Britain had produced a hagiographer whose chronicle of miracles – replete with vivid local data – had survived from post-Roman Britain to act as a companion to the works of Gregory of Tours.<sup>36</sup>

Emphasis on Italy and Africa underlines the sense of contingency in Brown's overall account. Had the senate of Rome paid off Alaric to his satisfaction, and the absentee landlords of Pelagian bent not retreated to their estates in Sicily and Africa, then Augustine's legacy would not have been the same. On wealth, the choices mapped out by Ambrose, Paulinus and the Pelagians would probably have taken centre-stage outside Africa.<sup>37</sup>

Yet by dwelling so resolutely on the heartlands of the Western Empire, Brown has left the periphery of the Roman world largely in shadow. To take one example, a remarkable voice from the fifth century, St Patrick, makes only a fleeting appearance, quoted for his perspective on the ransoming of baptized captives in fifth-century Gaul.<sup>38</sup> But for all the uncertainties that continue to surround his life and career, considerable progress has been made – and we have two works from Patrick's own hand, the *Confessio* and the *Epistola ad milites Corotici*, with which one might do something more.<sup>39</sup> Our most basic questions about Patrick, in the context of Brown's book, concern his attitudes both to wealth specifically and to

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<sup>36</sup> *TEN*, xxiii.

<sup>37</sup> The counter-factual proposition must turn on reputations, relationships and the precise circumstances in which Augustine's ascendancy emerged. See Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley, CA, 1994), ch.8; Dennis E. Trout, *Paulinus of Nola: Life, Letters, and Poems* (Berkeley, CA, 1999), ch.8; Jennifer Ebbeler, *Disciplining Christians: Correction and Community in Augustine's Letters* (Oxford, 2012), ch.5. For a fundamental study of how the ground slipped away from Pelagius and his followers, see Otto Wermelinger, *Rom und Pelagius: Die theologische Position der römischen Bischöfe im pelagianischen Streit in den Jahren 411-432* (Stuttgart, 1975).

<sup>38</sup> *TEN*, 395-6.

<sup>39</sup> David N. Dumville *et al.*, *Saint Patrick, AD493-1993* (Woodbridge, 1993) is a landmark. See also T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Oxford, 2000), 214-33; and now Tarmo Toom, 'What is St. Patrick's "Creed" (conf. 4)?' *Irish Theological Quarterly* 79 (2014), 3-13. Philip Freeman, *The World of Saint Patrick* (Oxford, 2014) is a useful collection of translated documents. Alexander Skinner, "The Needle's Eye: Wealth and Western Society from the Late Roman Empire to the Early Middle Ages," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 8 (2014) 68-89; ISSN: 1754-517X; Website: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/clarc/jlarc>

the relation between grace and free will. The latter problem is now the subject of a major paper by Alison Bonner.<sup>40</sup> Her overall finding repays attention:

Patrick's two works were influenced in general by the approach to Christianity of the ascetic reform movement of which Pelagius was one voice. They were not influenced specifically by Pelagius' defence of free will, or by those who tried to find a middle way between Augustine and Pelagius and emphasized the cooperation of grace and free will. The *Confessio* and *Epistola* were profoundly influenced by the controversy surrounding Pelagius, and for whatever reasons, Patrick made total adherence to an unreconstructed form of Augustinian theology the foundation of his declaration. By whatever means copies of Pelagius' works reached Ireland, it looks like it was not in Patrick's baggage.<sup>41</sup>

These observations lend a sense of paradox to the obvious fact that Patrick's attitude to wealth is radically different from Augustine's. Unlike the great doctrinal questions of grace and free will, Augustine was decidedly bland on the problem of wealth. Born to the lesser gentry in provincial Africa, Augustine was able to go far for an impeccably late Roman reason: patronage. One of the freshest aspects of Brown's treatment of the saint's formation is his exploration of the role of Romanianus, a local magnate, as patron and friend. Romanianus is deservedly given a sharper profile than usual as a central figure in Augustine's early adulthood, interwoven with an exploration of the roots of Augustine's intense interest in friendship.<sup>42</sup>

Brown is frank about the corollary. The young Augustine had no creative interest in the question of poverty *per se*.<sup>43</sup> It was, rather, his attraction to the dynamics of a small circle of closely bonded friends which underlay an abortive plan, in 385, for a philosophical commune; which fuelled his retreat at Cassiciacum in 386-7, and the writing of his *Dialogues*; and which finally shaped his religious communities in Africa – in Thagaste, after 388, and in the monastery at Hippo after 391.<sup>44</sup> Among like-minded aristocratic friends, the pooling of shared wealth was a natural feature of monastic life. Over time, it became a deliberate characteristic of Augustine's monastery as the monastery itself became more socially mixed. Indeed, the pooling

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<sup>40</sup> Alison Bonner, 'Was Patrick Influenced by the Teaching of Pelagius?' *Journal of Theological Studies* 63 (2012), 572-607.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 606-7.

<sup>42</sup> *TEN*, 153-60. See also Francesc Navarro Coma, 'Romaniano y Agustín: amistad e intereses entre un curial rico y un curial pobre', *Polis* 10 (1998), 247-267; Aimé Gabillon, 'Romanianus, alias Cornelius: Du nouveau sur le bienfaiteur saint Paulin et l'ami de saint Augustin', *Revue d'Etudes Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 24 (1978), 58-70.

<sup>43</sup> *TEN*, 168.

<sup>44</sup> *TEN*, 163-72. See now Tamer Nawar, 'Adiutrix Virtutum?: Augustine on Friendship and Virtue', in Suzanne Stern-Gillet and Gary M. Gurtler, S.J., (eds), *Ancient and Medieval Concepts of Friendship* (Albany, NY, 2014), 197-225.

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of wealth became emblematic in Augustine's developing thought (informed by Cicero and Plotinus) on the primacy of the common good and the rejection of private will.<sup>45</sup> Like Ambrose, Augustine would go on to appoint bishops from within his circle. Largely unlike Ambrose, Augustine's circle was monastic.<sup>46</sup>

Patrick's reception of the ascetic impulse took radically different form. In the *Epistola*, he quoted Ecclesiasticus, Job, Habakkuk, Matthew, Exodus and John, in a passage devoted to the theme of the rejection of gifts, the punishments awaiting those who obtain wealth unjustly, and avarice as a sin linked to murder.<sup>47</sup> He expounded on his attitude to the receipt of gifts from the laity in his *Confessio*:

I have done my best to safeguard myself, even in my dealings with Christian brethren and virgins of Christ and with pious women, who would give me unsolicited gifts and throw some of their jewellery on the altar, and I would return it to them, and they would take offence at my doing so; but I did so for the hope of eternity, to safeguard myself carefully in everything so that they would not catch me out or the ministry of my service under some pretext of my dishonesty and so that I would not give unbelievers the slightest opportunity for denigration or disparagement. But perhaps when I baptised so many thousands I hoped for even a halfpenny from any of them? Tell me, and I will give it back.<sup>48</sup>

Patrick was equally resistant to what might, in other hands, have been construed as an opportunity for an Augustinian approach to the pooling of wealth: 'Or when the Lord everywhere ordained clergy through someone as ordinary as me and I conferred on each of them his function free, if I asked any of them for even so much as the price of my shoe, tell it against me, and I shall give it back to you.'<sup>49</sup>

While resisting acts of giving, Patrick made a virtue of his spending, which he elevated to a form of proto-martyrdom:

No, rather I spent money on your behalf ... From time to time I gave presents to the kings, quite apart from the payments I made to their sons who travel with me ... But you know from experience how much I have paid to those who administered justice in all the districts ... I reckon I must have dispensed to them the price of fifteen men at least ... I have no regrets; indeed I am not satisfied with it – I still spend and I will spend more. The Lord has it in His power to grant me afterwards that I may spend myself for your souls. ... I am better suited to poverty and adversity than riches and luxury (but Christ the Lord too was poor for our sakes...)<sup>50</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *TEN*, ch.11.

<sup>46</sup> *TEN*, 174, on Ambrose; *TEN*, 142-3, on Augustine.

<sup>47</sup> Patrick, *Epistola*, 8-9, ed. & trans. A. B. E. Hood, *St Patrick: His Writings and Muirchu's Life* (Chichester, 1978), 36 (Latin), 56 (English).

<sup>48</sup> Patrick, *Confessio*, 49-50, ed. & trans. Hood, *St Patrick*, 32 (Latin), 51-52 (English).

<sup>49</sup> Patrick, *Confessio*, 50, ed. & trans. Hood, *St Patrick*, 32-33 (Latin), 52 (English).

<sup>50</sup> Patrick, *Confessio*, 51-55, ed. & trans. Hood, *St Patrick*, 33 (Latin), 52 (English).

Patrick, therefore, was professedly a purist of the sort that Augustine was not. The primary ascetic ideal of renunciation and poverty remained his stated guiding light on the question of wealth, even as he took a thoroughly Augustinian position on grace and free will. That this should be so is almost certainly a reflection of a deep influence on him of fourth- and fifth-century ascetic literature.<sup>51</sup> But it also presents us with significant questions about the transmission of ideas on wealth to the churches of the northern periphery, about the social and economic position of these churches in the fifth century, and about the relation between ideas on wealth and the wider ‘Pelagian Controversy’.

Brown’s answer reflects a commendable economy of effort. By way of an inscription in the Museum of the Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society, he gives us Bishop Paulinus, of southwest Wales, probably from the mid-sixth century. ‘Paulinus was praised as “always a lover of his *patria*” – his homeland. It was a phrase that was also used across the sea in Gaul’.<sup>52</sup> The Carmarthenshire inscription elegantly places the edge of the former Roman world within the frame of Brown’s discussion. But this leaves a large story untold. Praise of Paulinus as ‘lover of his homeland’ was vestigial. It was a remnant from Roman times. Indeed, as Brown has emphasized for the East in his *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, love of one’s homeland – understood in terms of the *polis* or *civitas* – was a public virtue with deep classical roots. It was precisely this notion that had stood to be reinvented by the notion of love for the poor.<sup>53</sup>

What the survival of this language in sixth-century Wales cannot tell us is how readily a body of thought about wealth, taking hold on the shores of the Mediterranean in the early to mid-fifth century, was transmitted to places that had by then already begun to drop out of the Roman orbit. What was the Carmarthenshire bishop Paulinus’ view on the acceptance of gifts? In the nature of things, the ascetic purism of Patrick was self-limiting. It was no way to build a ‘Celtic Church’. To what extent did Paulinus and his contemporaries need Augustine or a Pope to tell them this? Should we envisage a northward radiation of thought over time, liberating bishops from the obligations of an uncompromising asceticism to become good financial managers? Or might they, like independent discoverers of the Periodic Table, have arrived at the pragmatism of the African Church for themselves? What the case of Patrick makes clear is that the issue of change on the periphery of the former empire cannot be subsumed within the problem of the ‘reception’ of Augustine. Patrick was already flaunting his Augustinian credentials, but the two men would have loathed one another’s attitudes to money.

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<sup>51</sup> Stephanie Hayes-Healy, ‘Saint Patrick’s Journey into the Desert: *Confessio* 16-28 as Ascetic Discourse’, *Archivium Hibernicum* 59 (2005), 237-259.

<sup>52</sup> *TEN*, 503.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, NH, 2002). Alexander Skinner, ‘The Needle’s Eye: Wealth and Western Society from the Late Roman Empire to the Early Middle Ages,’ *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 8 (2014) 68-89; ISSN: 1754-517X; Website: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/clarc/jlarc>

## IV

That we should be left with these questions about the later fifth and sixth centuries is a reflection of Brown's chronological emphasis. 'The changes that took place between the years 500 and 650', he tells us, 'proved decisive. A new conglomerate of notions about the use of wealth, about the nature of the Christian community, and about the destiny of the Christian soul slid into place'.<sup>54</sup> But it is, plainly, the *formation* of this conglomerate by the mid-fifth century, not so much its later sliding into place, that Brown has sought to track in greatest detail.

Brown's overall chronology is revealing, nonetheless. Elsewhere he has proposed a long late antiquity, running to 750 or 800 even in the West.<sup>55</sup> Yet here he gives us a radically different emphasis. The panoramic parts of *Through the Eye of a Needle* make this overtly a book about the arrival of the early middle ages in the West. That the churches of Europe had come to feel their wealth 'in a world where bishops had become partners of the great but had by no means become their lords',<sup>56</sup> might tell us something about the difference between the early middle ages and a later world of greatly increased ecclesiastical (especially papal) ambition. But it is a medieval world nonetheless:

we have come to stand on the threshold of another world, one very different from the ancient world with which we began our story. By 600 AD, the structures of the church and the expectations of the laity had brought about a slow turning of the age. At last – after three long centuries, and only then – the Christians of Europe began to face toward the Catholicism of the western middle ages. ... The papacy of Gregory I did not mark the apogee of a triumphant church, ready to take over the governance of the post-Roman West. It was a good half century *earlier* [my emphasis] that the churches of Europe began to feel, somewhat to their surprise, the weight of their own wealth.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, throughout this book, Brown barely mentions 'late antiquity'. Noticeably too, he places the term in other hands:

We are dealing with a phenomenon that is peculiar to the period Hervé Inglebert has aptly named *une antiquité tardive post-romaine* – "a post-Roman late antiquity." Despite the disappearance of the Roman state, the

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<sup>54</sup> *TEN*, 527.

<sup>55</sup> Expansive and programmatic claims are made for a western late antiquity, up to Charlemagne, in G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar, *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), viii-ix, in an 'Introduction' that is unsigned but which carries Brown's unmistakable literary imprimatur – not least, of course, the observation (xii) that 'an Irishman's definition of a net remains true: it is "a lot of holes tied together with string"!'.

<sup>56</sup> *TEN*, xxii.

<sup>57</sup> *TEN*, xxi-xxii.

Alexander Skinner, "The Needle's Eye: Wealth and Western Society from the Late Roman Empire to the Early Middle Ages," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 8 (2014) 68-89; ISSN: 1754-517X; Website: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/clarc/jlarc>

cultural resources piled up in the Christian churches of the fourth and early fifth centuries continued to be deployed.<sup>58</sup>

It is impossible not to conclude that Brown's treatment of the West is sensitive to questions, in recent years, about how far and in what contexts 'late antiquity' is a useful framework.<sup>59</sup> Brown has written a book that eschews overt conceptualization in those terms and his thought on primary problems is clearly still evolving. The great insight of *The World of Late Antiquity* – that the end of the Western Empire and the end of the ancient world are not the same thing – continues to hold true.<sup>60</sup> But we now confront one crucial qualification: though not the same, they were profoundly connected. The decline in aristocratic wealth that followed political events was a vital component of the manner in which the Church achieved centrality in western society: 'As the nobility got poorer and the church grew richer, the incomes of the two groups (which had previously admitted no comparison) began to level up. At the same time, an imaginative levelling up occurred'.<sup>61</sup>

For the present reviewer, the chronology of *Through the Eye of a Needle* exemplifies the maxim that less is more. Central to Brown's sixth-century terminus is the rise of the 'managerial bishops'.<sup>62</sup> This went with the cementing of attitudes to Church wealth, in the sixth-century West, along lines tied to notions of pastoral care, monastic intercession and the distinctiveness of the clergy. The bishop is now moving to the centre of local society; the wealth of the Church serves a higher purpose; and changes in the behaviour of donors make the physical fabric of Christianity in 600 look very different from that of 400.<sup>63</sup> It is a perspective that aligns well with other findings. 'In a well-chosen phrase', Brown observes, 'Walter Goffart has described the change from a late antique to an early medieval society as a "process of simplification." This great simplification was well under way in the sixth century.'<sup>64</sup> Brown's emphasis here is on 'the "othering" of the clergy';<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *TEN*, 482, citing Hervé Inglebert, in collaboration with Pierre Gros and Gilles Sauron, *Histoire de la civilisation romaine* (Paris, 2005), 483.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Andrea Giardini, 'Esplosione di tardoantico', *Studi storici* 40 (1999), 157–80; J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, 'Late Antiquity and the Concept of Decline', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 45 (2001), 1–11; Edward James, 'The Rise and Function of the Concept "Late Antiquity"', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1 (2008), 20–30; Robert Markus, 'Between Marrou and Brown: Transformations of Late Antique Christianity', in Philip Rousseau and Manolis Papoutsakis (eds), *Transformations of Late Antiquity: Essays for Peter Brown* (Farnham, 2009), 1–13, at 2–3.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* (London, 1971); reissued with revised bibliography as *The World of Late Antiquity, AD150–750* (London, 1993). The western section ends (126–35) in about AD600.

<sup>61</sup> *TEN*, 468.

<sup>62</sup> *TEN*, ch.28, especially 496–8.

<sup>63</sup> *TEN*, ch.29. For a vivid insight into sixth-century Gallic ambiguities, see Lisa Bailey, 'The Strange Case of the Portable Altar: Liturgy and the Limits of Episcopal Authority in Early Medieval Gaul', *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 8 (2012), 31–51.

<sup>64</sup> *TEN*, 521, citing Walter Goffart, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire* (Philadelphia, PA, 2006), 136.

<sup>65</sup> *TEN*, 517–22. This furrow has been ploughed most heavily for Gaul. See, for example, Bruno Judic, 'Les modèles martinien dans le christianisme des V<sup>e</sup>-VII<sup>e</sup> siècles', Marie-Céline Isaïa, 'Le Alexander Skinner, "The Needle's Eye: Wealth and Western Society from the Late Roman Empire to the Early Middle Ages," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 8 (2014) 68–89; ISSN: 1754-517X; Website: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/clarc/jlarc>

but it helps analysis considerably that this largely coincides with a decisive militarization of lay aristocracies.<sup>66</sup> This is a book which tacitly, and rightly, puts the middle ages back into the seventh and eighth centuries. Sutton Hoo and the Staffordshire Hoard fall implicitly into place not as late flowerings of the ancient world. Rather, they are stunning examples of the new directions taken by early medieval craftsmanship – and, indeed, of the values of a profoundly militarized pattern of lay power.<sup>67</sup> They are testimony to the rootedness of the ‘great simplification’.

That this should be so has much to do with the transformation of social structures in the fifth- and sixth-century West. It is hard not to come away from the *tour d’horizon* provided by Chris Wickham without a strong sense of the erosion of ancient patterns of government and social organization at that time.<sup>68</sup> In Italy, where continuity was more profound, the prolonged campaigns of Justinian nonetheless ensured the bloody erasure of much of the Roman institutional and economic inheritance.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, it has become gradually harder to doubt that both climate and disease contributed to the localization and simplification of a large proportion of economic activity.<sup>70</sup> In *Through the Eye of a Needle*, Brown does not aim ‘merely to write yet another social and economic history of the later empire.’<sup>71</sup> But by working hard to keep his own choice of subject matter rooted in social history, he has shown how the history of religion and culture can align with other,

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saint évêque dans l’hagiographie lyonnaise (IV<sup>e</sup>-VII<sup>e</sup> s.)’, in Michèle Gaillard (ed.), *L’empreinte chrétienne en Gaule du IV<sup>e</sup> au IX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Culture et société médiévales 26, Turnhout, 2014), at 91-109 and 111-130, respectively. See also Lisa Bailey, ‘Within and Without: Lay People and the Church in Gregory of Tours’ Miracle Stories’, *Journal of Late Antiquity* 5 (2012), 119-144.

<sup>66</sup> *TEN*, 521-2; Peter Heather, ‘Elite Militarisation and the Post-Roman West’, in Giorgio Bonamente and Rita Lizzi Testa (eds), *Istituzioni, carismi ed esercizio del potere, IV-VI secolo d.C.* (Bari, 2010), 245-66.

<sup>67</sup> Sonja Marzinzik, *Masterpieces: Early Medieval Art* (London, 2013); Martin Carver (ed.), *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in Western Europe* (Woodbridge, 1992). Staffordshire Hoard: Elisabeth Okasha, ‘The Staffordshire Hoard Inscription and Other Biblical Texts in Anglo-Saxon Inscriptions’, *Medieval Journal* 1 (2011), 23-35; Stephen Dean, Della Hooke and Alex Jones, ‘The “Staffordshire Hoard”: the Fieldwork’, *Antiquaries Journal* 90 (2010), 139-152; Kevin Leahy and Roger Bland, *The Staffordshire Hoard* (London, 2009). Sutton Hoo and archaeological context: Angela Care Evans, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial* (London, rev. ed. 1994); Rupert L. S. Bruce-Mitford (with A. C. Evans), *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial* (London, 3 vols, 1975-83); Martin Carver (et al.), *Sutton Hoo: A Seventh-Century Princely Burial Ground and its Context* (London, 2005).

<sup>68</sup> Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, especially 33-50, 60, 80-124, 168-232, 465-95.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-7.

<sup>70</sup> Michael McCormick, Ulf Büntgen, Mark A. Cane, Edward R. Cook, Kyle Harper, Peter John Huybers, Thomas Litt, et al., ‘Climate Change During and After the Roman Empire: Reconstructing the Past from Scientific and Historical Evidence’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 43 (2012), 169-220; Peter Sarris, ‘Bubonic Plague in Byzantium: The Evidence of Non-Literary Sources’, in Lester K. Little (ed.), *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541-750* (Cambridge, 2007), 119-32. See also Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, 2005), chs.5-6, for a firm statement of a case for economic simplification.

<sup>71</sup> *TEN*, xxvi.

Alexander Skinner, ‘The Needle’s Eye: Wealth and Western Society from the Late Roman Empire to the Early Middle Ages,’ *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 8 (2014) 68-89; ISSN: 1754-517X; Website: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/clarc/jlarc>

very different, approaches. This in turn helps to open up an increasingly ‘total’ view of the end of antiquity, and the arrival of the early middle ages, in the closing years of the sixth century.

## V

Sir Ronald Syme famously observed: ‘Men and dynasties pass, but style abides.’<sup>72</sup> From Gibbon to Runciman, Anglophone historians have repeatedly shown that the most powerful learned evocations of the human past are written with the same degree of sensitivity, and hence the same literary accomplishment, that we expect of any great creative writer. It is not hard to see why. History is a humane discipline, concerned not only with highly technical analyses but also with the coherent presentation of past human experience. Yet to bring experience alive on the page means coming face to face, not only with the challenge of reconstructing what happened and why, but with the triple relation between history itself, its conveyance through prose and the sensation that this creates for the reader. In such a delicate operation, style is less a rhetorical device of argument than a precision tool of historical re-enactment.

In Brown’s case, the question of style has long been ‘on the table’. Both *Augustine of Hippo* and *The Body and Society* secured literary recognition – the latter in a category that saw him, in annual succession, preceded by the neurologist Oliver Sacks and followed by the novelist Ursula Le Guin.<sup>73</sup>

What one notices most is the economy of Brown’s prose. One has the strong sensation that his sentences are shorter than they often have been, so much so that the present reviewer took samples. Counting the words in the first full sentence to start on each of a neutral sample of pages yielded the following result: 31 words (p.50); 13 words (p.100); 10 words (p.150); 18 words (p.200); 21 words each (p.250; p.300; p.350); 12 words (p.400); 27 words (p.450); 14 words (p.500). This makes an average sentence length of 18.8 words. If one samples his *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity* (of 1992) in similarly ‘decimated’ manner, one finds an average sentence length of 22.4 words.<sup>74</sup> To go further back, a comparable sample of his collected papers in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (published individually between 1971 and 1977, and as a collection in 1982) yields an average sentence length of 24.5 words.<sup>75</sup> Such sampling could no doubt be improved upon;

<sup>72</sup> Ronald Syme, *Tacitus* (2 vols, Oxford, 1958), ii, 624.

<sup>73</sup> The Vursell Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters (not, that is, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences) was awarded to Sacks in 1989, Brown in 1990 and Le Guin in 1991. The Arts Council of Great Britain (as it then was) recognized Brown’s *Augustine* on its first publication.

<sup>74</sup> At ten intervals of 15 pages to span the book: 13 words (p.15); 24 words (p.30); 18 words (p.45, taking the first sentence of Brown’s, not the quoted phrase); 17 words (p.60); 40 words (p.75); 20 words (p.90); 12 words (p.105); 30 words (p.120); 36 words (p.135); 14 words (p.150).

<sup>75</sup> At ten intervals of 33 pages to span the book: 27 words each (p.33; p.66); 8 words (p.99); 20 words (p.132); 18 words (p.165); 63 words (p.198); 19 words (p.231); 35 words (p.264); 22 words (p.297); 6 words (p.330).

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but it reinforces one's qualitative impression. Brown's tendency to relatively short sentences in *Through the Eye of a Needle*, partly achieved by reducing the scatter of 'rolling periods', seems to track an intellectual shift. Real life is rarely lyrical – and money, as Benjamin Franklin might have thought, is the least lyrical thing next to death. The pared-back style strengthens the immediacy of Brown's prose, complementing the intellectual effort to embed the history of ideas in a pragmatic history of social experience.

Other aspects of the making of sentences reinforce the marriage of literary and intellectual purpose. Many writers of analytical history use direct source quotation not only to furnish evidence in argument but also to enrich their presentation of the past, and Brown has always been liberal with quotation. It is less usual, however, to see an analytic historian make effective use, as Brown from time to time allows, of 'free indirect style'. Largely pioneered by nineteenth-century novelists, this technique enhances the immediacy with which a reader can grasp a protagonist's experience by expressing first-person thought in a third-person sentence structure.<sup>76</sup> One can take just some examples. Of Ambrose's *On Naboth*: 'Last of all, we meet the rich themselves immured in palatial villas in the depths of a countryside drained of human life to make way for vast hunting reserves'.<sup>77</sup> Of the Christian community at Rome, implicitly observing the philanthropy of the rich aristocratic women among them: 'Where their money would go, nobody could tell ... it might be used, not to support the local church, but to fund the rancors of freelance polymaths'.<sup>78</sup> Of the views of the author of *De divitiis*: 'The extent of the wealth of the rich spelled out with implacable precision the extent to which they had dispossessed the poor'.<sup>79</sup> In each case the critical tone is of course ancient, not Brownian. And the protagonists being historical rather than fictional, it is the evidence which controls the authorial representation. But what this technique spares us is the unnecessary muffler of perpetually distant report. Sentences such as these show choices of

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<sup>76</sup> A large critical literature now exists. The pioneering studies are Charles Bally, 'Le Style indirect libre en français moderne', *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 4 (1912), 549-556 (I); 597-606 (II); and Etienne Lorck, *Die 'Erlebte Rede': Eine sprachliche Untersuchung* (Heidelberg, 1921). A landmark discussion in Anglophone criticism is Dorrit Cohn, 'Narrated Monologue: Definition of a Fictional Style', *Comparative Literature* 18 (1966), 97-112. See also Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and its Functioning in the Nineteenth-Century European Novel* (Manchester, 1977). Influential specific treatments include Graham Hough, 'Narrative and Dialogue in Jane Austen', *Critical Quarterly* 12 (1970), 201-29; and Marguerite Lips, 'Le Style indirect libre chez Flaubert', *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique* 18 (1921), 644-53. More recently see, for example, Massimiliano Morini, *Jane Austen's Narrative Techniques: A Stylistic and Pragmatic Analysis* (Farnham, 2009), chs.1-2. There are, however, enough literary references in Brown's prose from the outset to be sure that he learned this technique directly from literature, rather than criticism or theory.

<sup>77</sup> *TEN*, 140.

<sup>78</sup> *TEN*, 285.

<sup>79</sup> *TEN*, 316.

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vocabulary ('immured', 'drained', 'rancors', 'dispossessed') in which the reader has the direct sensation of past thoughts and feelings.

The rhythm of Brown's sentences is crafted in various ways to bring the past before us more vividly. Two examples can serve to illustrate the point. First, in a clever recasting of the well-worn 'Altar of Victory controversy', Brown contextualizes the incident within the findings of Rita Lizzi Testa and Charlotte Roueché, and the older work of Arthur Darby Nock, on the peculiarly close fourth-century association of emperors and Victory.<sup>80</sup> In a short passage tying off that point, attention to rhythm and juxtaposition lends a sense of irony to the observation that the familiar triumph of Ambrose was in fact eclipsed by that of the emperor, and also a sense of pathos to the defeat of Symmachus himself, whose worldview is of course the subject of the chapter:

Symmachus's memorandum was turned down, and Ambrose's reputation rose yet further in Christian circles. But the real winner was the emperor. An autocrat in a distant court, Valentinian II made clear, in his rejection of Symmachus's memorandum, that he did not need to depend either on the Senate or on the ancient rituals performed in Rome to be sure of the unique and still numinous protection of Victory.<sup>81</sup>

Here, Symmachus and Ambrose are *both* disposed of in short clauses, and juxtaposed with the 'real winner', giving way to a rolling period on the emperor's *de haut en bas* success.

Secondly, any analytical historian might be obliged to address a moment of human crisis. The sack of Rome a generation later, in 410, is central to the trajectory of Brown's book. At the close of two sombre paragraphs on the ascetic sense of the human condition – laden with 'the dramatic act of renunciation', 'a sense of the coming of the end of the world' and 'the shadow of the end of time'<sup>82</sup> – are two short sentences in which those concerns are suddenly overtaken by a concrete public emergency:

For, as we know, the Apocalypse did not come to Rome. But Alaric, the king of the Visigoths, did.<sup>83</sup>

Here, brevity, the ironic juxtaposition and assonance of 'Apocalypse' and 'Alaric', and a rhythm made more dramatic through the pauses implied by meticulous punctuation, underline a sense of crisis.

To take another literary tool, Brown's long-recognized use of simile and metaphor as implements of formal exposition still deserves notice. Though perhaps more

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<sup>80</sup> *TEN*, 107-8, with references.

<sup>81</sup> *TEN*, 108.

<sup>82</sup> *TEN*, 293-4.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 294. See Heather, *Goths and Romans*, 213-18; Meier and Patzold, *August 410*.

sparing in this book, it remains an economical way to render an historical point. Thus, Ambrose's work in Milan 'was like the ground course of a high building. It ceased to be noticed, but it had been decisive'.<sup>84</sup> 'Augustine's career was representative of the hopes of an entire class. Like the hum of a swarm of rising hornets, it was largely the noise created by such persons that gave unparalleled energy to the cultural and religious life of the Latin world in the fourth and early fifth centuries'.<sup>85</sup> '[I]n the Roman world, rural poverty was just as grim and as widespread as was poverty in the cities. This was true of Paulinus's Campania. It was a piebald province'.<sup>86</sup> 'Respect for the lower gods clung like a benign ground mist over large tracts of countryside'.<sup>87</sup> '[T]he churches of Latin Christianity came to be surrounded by a coral reef of institutions devoted to intercession'.<sup>88</sup> Or this extended simile:

The literature of the age [the sixth century] was overwhelmingly clerical and mainly hagiographic. Like a photographic plate, which privileges blue tones over red, a literature devoted to the deeds of saints and bishops did not register certain colors as clearly as others. The vivid blues of a bishop's activities stand out sharply, while the great red mass of lay life against which these deeds were set remains subdued – much as, in astronomers' photographs of the constellation of Orion, the vivid blue of a dwarf star tends to swamp the prodigious red globe of Betelgeuse.<sup>89</sup>

Occasionally, however, the use of metaphor and simile to elucidate historical observations is accompanied by another dimension. A fresh twist offers to revivify a cliché: 'the presence of Manichaean communities in Africa marked the westernmost foam of a wave of radical ascetic Christianity'.<sup>90</sup>

Or we have this:

... Leontius looked out over flowing pools filled with fish set in a landscape of wheatfields, which waved in the breeze like heavy blond hair.<sup>91</sup>

Here, the visual beauty of the scenery evoked in the mind's eye is reinforced by the author's ear for language. The simile comes at the end of an extraordinary sequence of alliteration, consonance and assonance. Packed into the space of twenty-four words are repeating sounds of 'l', 'f', 's' and 'z', 'w', 'b', 'h', and variants of 'oo' and 'o', the repeating sound of long 'ea', 'ie' and 'ee' ('wheatfields

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<sup>84</sup> *TEN*, 146.

<sup>85</sup> *TEN*, 153.

<sup>86</sup> *TEN*, 235.

<sup>87</sup> *TEN*, 237.

<sup>88</sup> *TEN*, 516.

<sup>89</sup> *TEN*, 506.

<sup>90</sup> *TEN*, 158.

<sup>91</sup> *TEN*, 218.

... breeze') and the repeating sound of short 'ea' and 'ai' ('heavy ... hair'). The rhythm which this creates serves an empathetic purpose on the page by relaying an image of the post-imperial maintenance of 'old Roman [villa] style' – sun-drenched aristocratic leisure, subtly combined with a refreshing conjuration of moving, splashing water by the paradox of 'flowing pools'.

No one, of course, is perfect. Ten pyramids on one page is perhaps a little too much masonry.<sup>92</sup> But it is obvious throughout that *Through the Eye of a Needle* shows us a literary craftsman still at work and still evolving. Given the Irish childhood aired by Brown in his autobiographical reflections, a somnolent critic might be tempted to suggest that he has long ago kissed the Blarney Stone. But one knows, of course, that the development of so distinctive a literary voice involves more than an agile act of tourism. Equally, it would be churlish to describe the literary methods involved as just so much rhetoric in the service of argument. The evidence of *Through the Eye of a Needle* shows Brown making constant, sensitive judgments about the medium we use for historical exposition. Gifts for observation and clarity of thought have been combined with literary craftsmanship in the reconstruction, and conveyance to the reader, of the sensation of past experience. The carefully judged use of literary methods is a reflection of a personal choice about the kind of history Brown wishes to write. Central to this is not only his authorial empathy, but his constant encouragement of empathy in the reader.

On this feature of the study of history, let us take a text from Marc Bloch:

C'est que le spectacle des activités humaines, qui forme son objet particulier, est, plus que tout autre, fait pour séduire l'imagination des hommes. Surtout lorsque, grâce à leur éloignement dans le temps ou l'espace, leur déploiement se pare des subtiles séductions de l'étrange. ... Gardons-nous de retirer à notre science sa part de poésie. Gardons-nous surtout, comme j'en ai surpris le sentiment chez certains, d'en rougir. Ce serait une étonnante sottise de croire que, pour exercer sur la sensibilité un si puissant appel, elle doit être moins capable de satisfaire aussi notre intelligence.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *TEN*, 151.

<sup>93</sup> Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien*, repr. in Marc Bloch, *L'Histoire, la Guerre, la Résistance* (Paris, 2006), 843-985, at 854. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (trans. Peter Putnam, 1954; repr. with preface by Peter Burke, Manchester, 1992), 7: 'The spectacle of human activity which forms its particular object is, more than any other, designed to seduce the imagination – above all when, thanks to its remoteness in time or space, it is adorned with the subtle enchantment of the unfamiliar. ... Let us guard against stripping our science of its share of poetry. Let us also beware of the inclination, which I have detected in some, to be ashamed of this poetic quality. It would be sheer folly to suppose that history, because it appeals strongly to the emotions, is less capable of satisfying the intellect.'

Alexander Skinner, "The Needle's Eye: Wealth and Western Society from the Late Roman Empire to the Early Middle Ages," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 8 (2014) 68-89; ISSN: 1754-517X; Website: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/clarc/jlarc>

## VI

In an illuminating essay, marking the bicentenary of the first appearance of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Brown closed with the following peroration (also, as it happens, one of his most impenitent rolling periods!):

If the modern historiography of Late Antiquity can regain some of Gibbon's anxious alertness to the weaving and reweaving of the restraining web of society, can reintroduce into its analysis of the social structure of the later Roman Empire and of the role of religion in this structure something of Gibbon's sense of the irony of a complex society, and, when faced with the overwhelming mass of material for the religious and cultural history of the age, be prepared to follow Gibbon in his many acts of silent renunciation, then we may move yet again from an age of erudition to an age of 'philosophic' history.<sup>94</sup>

Programmatic remarks of so grand a manner rarely find academic fulfilment. Yet almost forty years later, there is more than a little temptation to suggest that the intellectual and literary choices made by Brown in *Through the Eye of a Needle* exemplify the thinking behind those remarks. Not only is there the immense technical effort to bring social and religious history together. There is also a massive irony – which is indeed 'the irony of a complex society' – in the highly circumstantial nature of the rise to dominance of Augustinian thought. It is, of course, an irony rendered all the more compelling by its tectonic importance for western medieval history.

Had Brown wished to write a less ironic study, with less emphasis on contingency in historical causation, and a less developed exploration of those attitudes to wealth that did *not* have a future in the Catholic middle ages, then most of Part II might simply have been jettisoned. Conversely, he might have expanded his coverage of the fifth and sixth centuries, to follow through Augustine's impact more clearly. The renunciations involved in deciding *not* to tell this story are, indeed, many and silent. Instead, the lost futures of Part II form the most haunting and often most beautiful pages of the book. They stand as a reminder of the sheer improbability of what actually happened.

It is here that we find the join between literary style and intellectual purpose. One cannot write historical irony without literary irony. To attempt to do so would be leaden and didactic. Nor can one convey the human weight of futures lost and found without a controlled sense of drama and pathos. In all this, however, an

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<sup>94</sup> Peter Brown, 'Gibbon's Views on Culture and Society in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries', reprinted in Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA, 1982), 22-48, at 47-8. Previously published in *Daedalus* 105 (1976), 73-88, and in G. W. Bowersock, John Clive and Stephen R. Graubard (eds), *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 1977), 37-52.

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historian's historian must always stay faithful to the evidence. It is one of the pleasures of reading *Through the Eye of a Needle* that it shows a sensitivity to language and meaning, and to the formation of thought behind the expression of meaning, that places the historian's craft alongside the poets. In his most celebrated work, 'Under Milk Wood', Dylan Thomas famously captured the rich panoply of Welsh voices. Brown is so at home in the world he gives us that he has captured each ancient voice with the sure touch of a Celtic giant. What he has given us, as a result, is not only immense erudition, prepared with all the proper kitchenware of up-to-date academic method. It is also an illustration of what philosophic history can look like in the twenty-first century.