

nearly complete Syriac Old Testament Series, and will be studied with interest by the small but determined band of Syriac scholars.

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### **The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity**

Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (ed.)

Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2012. Hard Cover; 1248 pages; 20+ colour and black and white illustrations, maps; RRP A\$170; ISBN: 978-0-19-533693-1

Handbooks can be pedestrian compendiums of mediocre articles, but this OUP publication is a refreshing contribution to the study of Late Antiquity. Many of the chapters address expected themes, but they are unusually helpful, providing insightful contextual material and discussion of current debates. Packed into a weighty 1248 pages are 36 articles grouped into the four broad categories of 'Geography and Peoples', 'Literary and Philosophical Cultures', 'Religion and Religious Identity', and 'Law, State and Social Structures.' A final section on the wider world adds perspective and connects these themes to the Italian Renaissance. Every article is rich in detail and well presented, clearly articulating major themes and often using intriguing detail. There are extensive endnotes and bibliographies with each article, making this handbook almost encyclopedic in breadth. The topics, of course, cannot cover every people nor every religion, but the ones chosen are vibrant cameos and quite representative.

As well as the typical articles on the barbarians and Western kingdoms, the first section contains great pieces on the Balkans, the Syrians, Egypt, Arabia, Ethiopia, Armenia, and the Silk Road. On the Balkans, Caldwell discusses how the geography of Pannonia, Thrace and Dalmatia affected events and even the assassination of emperors. He discusses rainfall, rivers, and city walls, and many other aspects of life in this region, leaving the reader with an appreciation for the difficulties of travel, rule, and commerce. Philip Wood's article on the Syrians focusses on the enormous Syriac literature of Late Antiquity and summarises the recent changes in the historiography of Syriac writing. The Syriac tradition is a vastly understudied field given that it is the legacy of a third of the population of the Church of Late Antiquity. Wood discusses the *Doctrina Addai*, Jewish influence, Jacob of Serugh, the social and political context, and other texts and issues. This is a solid introduction to the field of uniquely Syriac Christian thought.

In the second part of the handbook, we find articles on Greek and Latin Poetry, Education, Travel, and Cosmology among others. Of special note is the piece by Gregory Smith on Physics and Metaphysics, which is unusually clear and insightful when dealing with Greek metaphysics. He discusses several of the main themes of Late Antique metaphysics and how they developed and influenced modern thinking. Smith

draws on many sources and his analysis is insightful and engaging. His writing provides the context for reading Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius in a concise yet comprehensive way. Smith explains how 'the ancients' understood the body-soul relation, the importance of Plotinus, and why philosopher's faces "shone" in a way that is compelling reading. This is certainly how philosophy should be introduced. Also good is Rubenson's article on monasticism, as it avoids many of the usual simplistic tropes and discusses monasteries as schools in the classical Greek tradition. Rubenson shows that *paideia* pervaded many monasteries, as demonstrated in the texts produced there, and this informs our understanding of monasteries as preservers of classical Greek culture.

A wide variety of articles feature in the third section, ranging from Marriage and Family to Economics, Rural issues, Citizenship and Roman Law. Andrew Gillett's contribution is *Communication in Late Antiquity: Use and Reuse*. Gillett discusses various aspects of epistolary practice including the cultural significance of the letter within the broader concerns of the elite's approach to maintaining their social status. He also notes the various political and social functions of letter collections and provides readers with many examples. In a similarly analytical work, Peregrine Horden surveys the rise of hospitals from Basil of Caesarea and Pachomius onwards, and the theological motivations and social impact of this innovation. Horden discusses the various Greek terms used in relation to the care of the sick, and traces literary evidence for their effectiveness and extent. There are 122 endnotes in this twenty-two page piece: this is a good example of the density and informativeness of all the Handbook's articles.

Section Four is another fascinating collection of articles on Religion and Identity, with contributions on Sacred Space and Visual Art, Paganism and Christianisation, and Episcopal Leadership. Hoyland's piece on Early Islam as a Late Antique religion is very insightful for contextualising Islam within the broader theological and social currents present on the Eastern fringes of the Roman Empire. His critique of trends in the modern historiography of Islam that 'other' Islam is clear, relevant and poignant. Hoyland's analysis shows that Islam was very much a part of Late Antiquity in many ways, from its emphasis on personal piety, its use of political power, and its widespread appropriation of Greek classical thought. Arabia is shown to be an integral part of the cosmopolitan world of the time, a point previously made by Irfan Shahid but still ignored by too many scholars.

This handbook is definitely worth a read. Every article has valuable insights and makes connections to a wide range of topics. It is not an encyclopedia per se, but covers such a broad range of people, places, trends, and events that the overall effect is of a many-windowed view of the world of Late Antiquity. Scholars will find it full of useful reference material and many jumping-off points for further research.

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