



Day, R. (2012) 'Gillian Clark, *Late Antiquity: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011'.

*Rosetta* **11**: 82-86.

[http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue\\_11/day.pdf](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue_11/day.pdf)

---

**Gillian Clark, *Late Antiquity: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 128. £7.99. ISBN 978-0-19-954620-6 (Pbk).**

Reviewed By Rebecca Day  
*University of Birmingham*

Late antiquity, as Clark comments in her introductory chapter (p.1) is a term of comparatively new invention. In the last half a century it has become a focal point for scholars from a range of disciplines, and the subject of debate and negotiation. Clark does not attempt to simplify the result of this complex scholarly heritage by reifying late antiquity or its historiography. For a student of late antiquity, this is a particularly useful approach, as it permits the author to unpick points of discussion, while reflecting on the reasons why these have become significant to historical debate: Clark explores in the first two pages, for example, the implications of 'late' antiquity in terms of the development of the period out of perceptions of the classical past.

Methodologically, the book tackles late antiquity principally from the perspective of surviving texts. As will be discussed later, the work of Augustine of Hippo forms a gravitational hub around which Clark arranges other ideas. More generally, she deploys vignettes from textual sources to illustrate key arguments. Material culture is utilised to illustrate points, but such material appears primarily in a supportive capacity. The emphasis on documentary sources is perhaps reflected most profoundly in the minimal treatment of economic history in the book. Despite the fact that the economic infrastructure of late antiquity has been the subject of some of the most significant, contested and cutting-edge debate over the last decade, no chapter in *Late Antiquity: A Very Short Introduction* deals specifically with this subject.

Though economic historians may miss a dedicated chapter, however, Clark provides in less than 130 pages a remarkably cohesive and thought-provoking summary of late antiquity, which could not have been achieved via a series of subject-specific mini-studies. Instead, Clark centres her narrative around the life and writings of Augustine of Hippo. *City of God* frames the narrative, as Augustine's concept of the two cities, of Man and God, is deployed in Chapter 1 (p.12) as a means of

understanding the shift from pre-Christian to Christian world views within the Roman Empire, and again at the close of the book, where it becomes a device for highlighting those key features of late antiquity, which Clark perceives to have particular resonance in the modern world.

In a study necessarily concerned with wider relevance and breadth of coverage, Clark divides her subject into eight chapters. 'What and when is late antiquity' is principally historiographical and explores the development of late antiquity as a subject area, including the key debate over decline and fall versus transformation. She also discusses crucial definitional questions about the beginning and end of late antiquity. If her assessment of the field of scholarship is a little optimistic: 'Many disciplines meet here... All reflect on what they do and why, and all keep in touch in the age of the Internet' (p.2), it does give an exciting impression of the subject area, and an achievable model to which scholars can aspire.

Chapter two, 'Running the Empire' introduces key themes of late antiquity, including the shift of Roman power to the East and the changing role of the Emperor, first as a result of the crises of the third century, and second as a consequence of Christianization. In a style typical of the book, the theme of governance is allowed to meander engagingly through a series of illustrative examples and digressions, taking in the importance of the games (with a brief analysis of the Nika riots), the lives of students and currency speculation. Again setting the pattern for later chapters, the closing paragraph summarises key ideas and seeks to link the themes discussed to the experience of the modern reader (in this case, by commenting on the present meaning of 'byzantine' to denote inefficiency and complicated bureaucracy (p.29)).

'Law and Welfare' falls into two clear sections, linked by similar treatment. The first section deals with the inheritance of Roman law, the administration of law and the changes which late antiquity saw in the codification of legislation. This also provides a vehicle for discussing the linguistic shift in Roman imperial administration from Latin to Greek. The section on welfare takes a similarly comparative approach, juxtaposing Roman attitudes towards social obligation and charity with emerging Christian ideas of social welfare. John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, the

legislation of Justinian I and the reign of Julian the Apostate all provide anchors in this narrative.

Chapters four and five, on 'Religion' and 'What shall we do to be saved?' are comparatively lengthy (36 pages in total) and seem in the context of Clark's general reliance on Augustine of Hippo, to provide a central spine to the whole work. Clark is fairly explicit about this, commenting that 'editing out religion means editing out the religious change which is one of the most distinctive and spectacular features of late antiquity' (p.41). She justifies her emphasis on religion with a clear and compelling chapter (four), which moves smoothly in the winding style of the book through the role of Roman religion in state life, the codification of Christian and Jewish texts, monasticism and Edward Gibbon, and the rise of imperial Christianity as a consequence of Constantine I's reign. Heresy and rhetoric provide the mechanism for drawing the close of the chapter back from the heights of imperial policy and religious philosophy towards everyday experiences of religion.

'What shall we do to be saved?' is harder to pin down. In content it covers a wide range of subjects, including relics, holy men and women, the use of classical philosophy in religious debates and questions surrounding the appointment of bishops. The opening of the chapter is perhaps the clearest indication of its aim: 'Religion as an aspect of politics is a modern interpretation' (p.58). This chapter provides a way into the preoccupations, which sometimes seem most perplexing to modern readers approaching late antiquity for the first time: a deep concern with theological matters, the extreme behaviour of certain ascetics. In an introductory text such as this, this chapter is possibly the most ambitious, but works extremely well as a result of well-chosen case-studies, which give late antiquity a human and identifiable face.

'Barbarism' deals with the impact of groups from outside the Roman Empire upon the development of society. This entails examining and critiquing Roman perceptions of barbarians, and exploring the impact of post-colonial thought on studies of barbarians in late antiquity. The cases of the Battle of Adrianople (AD 378) and the

Gothic sack of Rome (AD 410) provide vehicles for examining how far barbarian invasion and depredation was balanced by peaceful accommodation.

Chapter seven is entitled 'Bronze elephants: classical and Christian culture' and takes the form of an extended case study. In the sixth century, the Ostrogothic king, Theodohad, wrote to the urban prefect of Rome, ordering the restoration of monumental bronze elephants, which lined the Sacred Way, but which had fallen into disrepair. As Clark points out, Theodohad's concern for such an apparently peripheral aspect of material culture seems superficially strange. The bronze elephants, however, become the thread which connects a longer examination of late antique uses of classical culture, including the use of (and controversy over the use of) classical philosophy in Christian thought. The Ostrogothic rule of Italy, and its use of Roman modes of governance is also explored in some depth.

Finally, chapter eight, 'Decisive change?' deals with the rise of Islam and the utility of this as a cut-off for late antiquity. Discussing the continuities and new departures generated by interaction with Islam, Clark preserves the vision of late antiquity, which she creates in the preceding chapters, as a historical period and an area of scholarship defined by negotiation and competing continuities and discontinuities. The conclusion of the chapter brings the reader back to Gibbon and Augustine of Hippo, with their different perspectives on Christianity and society. Clark's effort to stress the relevance of late antiquity ('what matters most as our own world struggles with climate change, too little cash and too many barbarians? Late antiquity offers some answers.' (p.116)) may seem strained, and a little troubling (who are our barbarians?). Nevertheless, it is a passionate and eloquent plea for a complex, nuanced and sensitive understanding of a period which resists simple analysis.

In practical terms, the book is attractively laid out with useful and clear images used to supplement the text. A larger number of maps may have helped to elucidate certain topics, including the changing shape of the Roman Empire and its neighbours. The Roman Empire c. AD 400 is illustrated at the start of the book, but an equivalent map of the Mediterranean region c. 750-800 would have provided a useful visual aid to support the final chapter.

The section on 'Further Reading' is necessarily select, but includes recent and more 'classic' scholarship, and usefully summarises the interpretative position of many works and the material they cover. The guide to sources could have included some of the online editions of texts in the interests of promoting the modern face of late antique studies, but is otherwise up-to-date. Overall, this book would provide an excellent starting point for a reader new to the subject of late antiquity, but approaches the subject and handles the material in ways which should engage more experienced scholars of the period.