

CHAPTER SIX

Late Antiquity in Modern Eyes

Stefan Rebenich

On September 12, 1921, during an autumn colloquium on the arts and sciences, Ernst Kornemann (1868–1946) gave a lecture in Kiel on the decline of the ancient world. He described the topic of his address as “the problem of problems” in historiography. Then he proposed a possible solution: he suggested that the prosperity at the time of imperial rule had generated decadence everywhere, paralyzed social cohesion, destroyed the military masculine morale that had once made Rome great, and led the emperors to pursue an illusory policy of peace. In consequence, cultural life had come under the detrimental influence of a collectivist religiosity of eastern provenance (Kornemann 1922).

That was not an original view. In the humanities, the problem formulated by Kornemann had been an enigma for centuries – and it still is. The discussion centered on two questions: why did the Roman Empire decline; and when did this decline occur?

Let us first address the associated division of history into periods. Italian scholars of the Renaissance thought in terms of antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the modern age – a model still familiar today. This model, which displaced the universal historical periodization characteristic of the Christian tradition – especially the theory of the four empires – was based on the assumption that the so-called Middle Ages had been a 1,000-year-long period of decline. That decline had to be overcome by bringing about a new epoch, one that would be connected to the period these scholars regarded as their norm: pagan and Christian antiquity.

After the sixteenth century, numerous authors tried to define more precisely the nature and date of the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages. Their suggestions included the coming to power of Diocletian (AD 284); the era of Constantine, in particular his accession (AD 306), his victory at the Milvian Bridge (AD 312), or the beginning of his autocratic rule (AD 324); and the crossing of the Danube by the Goths (AD 376), the Battle of Hadrianople (AD 378), and the settlement of the Goths within the empire (AD 382). These events, they argued, while not constituting the

boundary between antiquity and the Middle Ages themselves, prepared the ground for an event that actually signaled that antiquity had ended – namely the loss of the unity of the empire, following the death of Theodosius I (AD 395), the sack of Rome by Alaric (AD 410), or (most often mentioned) the deposition of Romulus Augustulus (AD 476) – an event that even contemporaries like Eusebius, Count Marcellinus, and Procopius considered a turning point. All of these suggestions were based on the assumption that there had been a sudden change in historical circumstances, triggered either by internal developments or by such external catastrophes as the triumph of the Christian faith or invasion by barbaric hordes.

In the nineteenth century, historians discarded that view: the notion of a gradual change replaced the idea of an abrupt transition. Scholars no longer considered the break between antiquity and the Middle Ages as clear-cut as their predecessors had, and, influenced by the classic work of the Austrian historian Alfons Dopsch (1868–1953), *Wirtschaftliche und soziale Grundlagen der europäischen Kulturentwicklung* (1918–20), many emphasized the continuity rather than the discontinuity between antiquity and the Middle Ages. As a result, the boundary between antiquity and the Middle Ages clearly shifted to later periods: among the proposals were now the invasion of Italy by the Lombards (AD 568), the reigns of the emperors Justinian (AD 527–65) or Heraclius (AD 610–41), or the pontificate of Pope Gregory the Great (AD 590–604). The Belgian economic historian Henri Pirenne (1862–1935) even advocated the thesis that Islam alone – or, more precisely, the advance of the Arabs in North Africa and Spain – had brought about the epochal change (Pirenne 1937). This notion of a successive transformation lasting several centuries established Late Antiquity as an epoch *sui generis*. The concept of a “long” Late Antiquity that lasted from the third century to the seventh proved not only extremely rewarding for political, but also for ecclesiastical, cultural, economic, social, and literary history.

As to the causes of the decline of the Roman Empire, it must be kept in mind that, ever since the age of humanism, Late Antiquity has been regarded as an era of decline, thought to have begun with Constantine, with the soldier emperors, with Commodus, or even with Augustus. Numerous explanations for the supposed fall of the *Imperium Romanum* and the ancient world have been given (D’Elia 1967; Demandt 1984). Frequently, individual accounts have revealed more about the ideological and political position of their authors than about the historical patterns they claim to portray. The most prominent of the critical internal and external events that have been suggested are the rise of Christianity, the division between rich and poor, the spread of the Germanic peoples, exhausted sources of subsistence – through deterioration of the climate, soil erosion, and depopulation – as well as lead poisoning and hypothermia, racial interbreeding and biological degeneration: all of these possibilities have been considered by various authors. Views that are diametrically opposed to each other can also be found: for some, the Germans are destructive, while others regard them as protectors and revivers of ancient culture; here the end of Greco-Roman paganism is mourned, there the birth of Christian Europe is welcomed. Authors like Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) and Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975) attempted to derive from the decline of the Roman world a theory of change, a notion of cultural cycles that would explain the emergence of new patterns of

social, political, and cultural organization. Representatives of the materialistic view of history – which is now obsolete – portrayed Late Antiquity as a transitional period between ancient slave-owning society and the feudalism of the Middle Ages (Heinen 1980). In recent decades, however, the perception of Late Antiquity has significantly changed: the period is no longer seen as an era of decline and crisis but as an epoch of metamorphosis in the Mediterranean region (Liebeschuetz 2001b).

A Positive View of Late Antiquity

An enumeration of individual positions and concepts (such as I have provided above) can be only a starting point for a critical history of earlier and contemporary studies in Late Antiquity. To provide a necessary corrective to current research and an incentive to examine the discipline itself more critically, we have to identify the historical circumstances that influenced the historiography on Late Antiquity. Over the centuries, both humanism and Protestantism impeded a positive view of Late Antiquity as an epoch in its own right, and scholars thought of it as a transitional period between antiquity and the Middle Ages, and judged it unfavorably as an era of decline. Still, the production of the great editions of texts composed by Christian authors and other writers of Late Antiquity that was characteristic of this phase was of vital importance for subsequent research into the later period. Thus, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, scholars from the Netherlands and France, Italy and Germany, England and the Scandinavian countries succeeded the humanists and emerged as literary critics and editors. A multitude of late classical and Byzantine works were printed for the first time – in some instances supplemented by brilliant conjectural emendations and profound annotations. The Huguenot and lawyer Jacobus Gothofredus (Jacques Godefroy, 1587–1652) deserves a special mention here: even today, his commentary on the *Codex Theodosianus* (1665) is indispensable. Moreover, a wealth of antiquarian literature was devoted to the late Roman Empire and the early Church.

Catholic scholars had always been eager, since the Counter-Reformation, to present the foundation of the Roman Church as a feature of Christian antiquity. From 1643 onward, the Jesuit Bollandists edited and commented on hagiographic texts. For over two generations, from the late 1660s, the Benedictine congregation of St. Maur (the “Maurists,” such as Jean Mabillon, Bernard de Montfaucon, and Thierry Ruinart) published editions of numerous “Fathers of the Church” that in many respects have not been surpassed to the present day. The French cleric Jacques-Paul Migne (1800–75) reprinted a large number of the texts in his extensive and still widely consulted editorial enterprise, the *cursus completus* of early ecclesiastical and medieval writings of the Fathers (the *Patrologia Latina* and the *Patrologia Graeca*, known universally as “Migne”). Meanwhile, Louis Sébastien Le Nain de Tillemont (1637–98), having made extensive use of primary sources, had published two general accounts of the imperial and ecclesiastical history of the (late) Roman Empire: *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique des six premiers siècles* (sixteen volumes,

1693–1712), and *Histoire des empereurs* (six volumes, 1690–1738), the latter covering the period from Augustus to Anastasius, 31 BC–AD 518. Up to the end of the nineteenth century, both works had a lasting effect on the scholarly perception and study of Late Antiquity.

The secularized historiography of the Enlightenment likewise put greater emphasis on the decline of the Roman Empire than on the rise of the Roman republic. Gibbon was not in this regard the only figure of importance. In his *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734), Montesquieu had already shown how ingenious legislation had made Rome great, but also how, with law-governed necessity, the cost of Rome's triumph was its decline, as the temptations of power destroyed the virtues of the Roman people and the principles of Roman politics. With the French Revolution, however, the Roman republic became once again the focus of scholarly and public interest all over Europe.

An Authority for the Present

From the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, antiquity was reinterpreted in Europe in historical, political, and aesthetic terms. The enthusiasm for “classical” Greek art and literature – a marked development in Germany toward the end of the eighteenth century – hastened a tendency to separate pagan from Christian antiquity. The idealization of Greece had already acquired a contemporary political dimension: in accordance with the liberating traditions of the Enlightenment, Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68) and his contemporaries saw Athens as not only a center of artistic and humane ideals, but also a seat of political freedom. By restoring to the center of inquiry this more loosely structured history of ancient Greece, the German *Bürgertum* discovered a welcome alternative to the cultural hegemony of the French.

But German neohumanism did not by any means lead inevitably to a diminution of interest in Late Antiquity. On the contrary: from the French Revolution on, a positive view of this epoch spread throughout Europe. The decline of the Roman Empire, it was believed, affected only paganism, which had outlived its use and had to make way for Christianity and the Germanic kingdoms. The experience of political and social revolutions in Europe between 1789 and 1848 established Late Antiquity as an epoch in its own right, characterized by changes and reassessments that were, in turn, compared to phenomena of the present. The present, in other words, was historicized, and the past acquired a controlling authority in contemporary debate (Herzog 1987b). In the previous generation Gibbon had never harnessed Late Antiquity in this way to a new view of the European future, since he had never envisaged that a catastrophe comparable to the decline of the ancient world would happen in his own time. During the first half of the nineteenth century, however, a range of scholars and *littérateurs* in France (Herzog 1987a) and England (DeLaura 1969), as well as Germany – liberals, absolutists, and ultramontanists – projected their respective political expectations (and disappointments) onto Late Antiquity. The Left celebrated a “radical” early Christianity, welcomed the industrial workers as new “invaders,”

and condemned the “bourgeois” conformity of the Constantinian era. The failure of the Revolution of 1848 inspired yet another interpretation that transformed the positive political manipulation of Late Antiquity and relegated it once more to the past. The barbarians were now no longer seen as bearers of an ancient legacy but as founders of early nationalism. Authors inspired by neohumanism (not only in Germany) once more idealized Greco-Roman antiquity, while clearly distinguishing it from the late empire.

After the mid-nineteenth century, the Rome of Late Antiquity was rediscovered by the literary avant-garde. European intellectuals like Flaubert and Mallarmé, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde transformed a decadent Late Antiquity without future prospects into a model epoch for the *fin de siècle*. They claimed to have recognized there (although they distorted it in many ways) what they thought of as the predecessor of the “modern” author. The experience of living themselves in what they saw as a “late” period distanced them from at least some of the realities of that past, and fostered a melancholic modernity that took pleasure in death and decline. This nineteenth-century aesthetic pessimism favored in particular the use of subjects relating to Late Antiquity. Thus, the first stanza of the sonnet *Langueur* by Paul Verlaine (1844–96), published in 1883, reads:

Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la décadence,
Qui regarde passer les grands Barbares blancs
En composant des acrostiches indolents
D'un style d'or où la langueur du soleil danse.

And the English literary critic Arthur Symons (1865–1945) ascribed to the literature of Late Antiquity “an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilising refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity” (Fletcher 1979: 24).

Late Antiquity and German *Altertumswissenschaft*

In the nineteenth century, the German program of *Altertumswissenschaft* had a lasting influence on classical studies throughout the western world, representing a profound break in the exploration not only of Late Antiquity but of antiquity as a whole (Rebenich 2000a). Independent scholarly methods and enterprises that had been pursued in the Netherlands, France, England, and Italy up till then were abandoned. Within a few decades, the *Altertumswissenschaft*, established by Christian Gottlieb Heyne (1729–1812) at the University of Göttingen, had succeeded in transforming an aristocratic hobby into an academic discipline and promoting a new professorial elite. The interpretation of written records, based on a thorough survey of the sources, now became the cognitive process crucial to historical research. The fundamental principle of this research was objectivity; but belief in the inherent significance of historical events was also important, as was the role of the individual. Following the

lead of Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776–1831) and August Boeckh (1785–1867), many authors of the period saw the central responsibility of the scientific disciplines relating to antiquity as *cognitio totius antiquitatis*, that is, as an understanding of the classical heritage in its entirety: pagan as well as Christian; of the early Greek period just as much as of the late Roman period. Prodigious joint productions – *Corpora*, *Monumenta*, and *Thesauri* – made the legacy of the ancient world more accessible (Rebenich 1999). Scholars adopted with fresh confidence an empirical style of historical analysis. Faith in progress and scientific optimism characterized this new professional study of antiquity in universities and academies. The work of Theodore Mommsen (1817–1903), who demanded that scholars “organize the archives of the past” according to a detailed program of his own devising, provides the best-known example (Rebenich 2002). A large-scale enterprise emerged, devoted to the study of antiquity, that impressively confirmed the efficiency of *Quellenforschung* but also encouraged a division between the editing and the interpretation of sources, thus turning many scholars into mere laborers. The historicization of the ancient world necessarily implied the rejection of an earlier view – that antiquity represented some sort of norm, or that it validated a contemporary aestheticism. The unique position of antiquity, especially that of the Greeks, was sacrificed.

The ideal of totality regarding the study of antiquity implied the collecting, critical editing, and historical evaluation of Christian and late antique evidence. Consequently, the *hérôs ktistês* of modern Roman classical studies, Theodor Mommsen, had already, at the beginning of his academic career, dealt with questions about the history and chronology of the written records of the Later Roman Empire, especially Roman law and its sources. His understanding of constitutional law made him presume a clear division between the early and high empire and Late Antiquity. Mommsen contrasted the principate of Augustus with the “dominate” of the late empire, a period that, as he argued, began with Diocletian and was characterized by an excessive veneration of the emperor as *dominus* in a supposedly “oriental” (that is, predominantly Persian) style.

For many different disciplines the historico-critical method now formed the basis for their examination of Late Antiquity. The central task, for those who adopted this approach, was the editing of the relevant sources. The editions thus created formed a reliable basis for all historical reconstructions of Late Antiquity (and continue to do so). In 1828, Niebuhr created the *Bonner Corpus der byzantinischen Geschichtsschreiber*; from 1866 onward the *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* was published in Vienna; and from 1928 onward Eduard Schwartz (1858–1940) set about editing the *Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum*. In 1891, the committee on the fathers of the church was founded at the Academy in Berlin, where historians, theologians, and classicists together edited the *Griechische christliche Schriftsteller der ersten (drei) Jahrhunderte*. This venture demonstrates how textual criticism historically surmounted the paradigm of decline: the theologians regarded the edition of the fathers as a vital instrument for the historically reliable reconstruction of the dogmatic conditioning of early Christianity; the historians wanted to reconstruct the history of Christianity in the Roman state; and the philologists intended to write a history of the literature of both the high and the later empire (Rebenich 2001).

Ancient writers were now published who had previously been ignored, either because their subjects did not coincide with popular taste, or because scholars schooled in the Latin of Cicero took exception to their barbaric style. With his great editions for the *Monumenta Germaniae historica*, Mommsen made accessible the history of Late Antiquity (Croke 1990b). He himself edited the *History of the Goths* by Jordanes, the *Variae* of Cassiodorus, and the *Chronica minora*; and he energetically assisted with other editions. Additionally, there are his great patristic editions: the *Life of Severin* by Eugippius, the *Liber pontificalis*, and Rufinus' translation of Eusebius' *Historia ecclesiastica*. Mommsen also made outstanding contributions to the collections of legal texts of Late Antiquity. He published between 1868 and 1870, with the help of Paul Krüger, the vast two-volume edition of the *Digesta*, followed in 1872 by a more concise volume that was part of the *Corpus iuris civilis*. He did extensive preliminary work for the edition of the *Codex Theodosianus*, published posthumously in 1904. These editions of Christian and late classical texts formed the basis for linguistic discussions about "vulgar" Latin and a distinctively Christian Latin ("eine christliche Sondersprache") that prompted an intensive debate in the twentieth century (Mohrmann 1977: 111–40).

Mommsen had intended to create, in collaboration with the Protestant ecclesiastical historian Adolf Harnack (1851–1930), a prosopography of Late Antiquity. But this large-scale interdisciplinary project, which sought to create a fundamental prosopographical reference work for secular and ecclesiastical historians, as well as for theologians and philologists, failed – its objective was too broad – and it was finally abandoned in the 1930s. The materials collected, however, served as a basis for the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* and the *Prosopographie chrétienne du bas-empire* (Rebenich 1997a; 1997b: 247–326).

Dissenting Perspectives on Late Antiquity

In the second half of the nineteenth century, an awareness of an impending crisis spread through the world of classical studies – just as it did in other disciplines. Criticism focused on a scholarship that threatened to fall apart and produce only imitators. The watchword "historicism" appeared with increasing frequency in contemporary discussions; and soon the phrase "crisis of historicism" became popular (Rebenich 2000a). Critics denounced the relativism of values that had come to characterize historically oriented inquiries – which they accused of being out of touch with everyday life – and condemned the sterile objectiveness of antiquated research. Under the influence of Jacob Burckhardt (1818–97) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), as well as of earlier conceptions, scholars argued over the problematic correlation of scholarship and life. They questioned the legitimacy of a classical scholarship that concentrated on positivist results and whose historical relativism undermined any normative understanding of antiquity.

Intellectual dissidents now searched for new concepts and explanations, which prompted the reconstruction of the history of early Christianity and Late Antiquity.

Jacob Burckhardt opted for a historical understanding of the past and rejected theological explanations. He explained the triumph of Christianity in Late Antiquity as the result of developments within paganism. In his first work, *Die Zeit Constantins des Grossen*, published in 1853, he described the Roman emperor as “a brilliant man, whose ambition and thirst for power afforded him no rest”; a calculating politician, in other words, in respect of whom “there could be no talk of Christianity and paganism, conscious religiousness and an absence of religion.” “Such a person,” Burckhardt declared, “is essentially unreligious, even if he should imagine himself as standing at the center of a church community.”

Friedrich Nietzsche attacked those of his colleagues who attempted to understand the present by studying the past but effectively destroyed in this process all historical norms. He distanced himself from the relativizing examinations of Late Antiquity and boldly blamed the Christians for the fall of Rome. In the fourth part of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1885), he wrote,

It was once – methinks year one of our blessed Lord –
 Drunk without wine, the Sybil thus deplored,
 “How ill things go! Decline! Decline!
 Ne’er sank the world so low!
 Rome now hath turned harlot and harlot-stew,
 Rome’s Caesar beast, and God – has turned Jew!”

In his *Antichrist*, published in 1894, he described Christianity as the “vampire” of the Roman Empire. Christians, “these holy anarchists,” had destroyed the empire, “until no stone was left standing on top of another – until even the Germanic peoples and other boors were able to take it under their control.” In this way, he had rejected all those who, like Hegel (1770–1831), regarded Christians and Germanic peoples as the pioneers of progress.

The Challenge of Evolutionary Biology

Otto Seeck (1850–1921), a pupil of Mommsen, tried to offer a new explanation for the fall of Rome. His six-volume *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt*, stands out in particular for its close adherence to the sources, its impressive wealth of detail, and its superior control of the subject matter. Seeck aspired to make it more than just a summary of what had happened: he aimed to introduce the reader to “the laws governing historical processes of formation and decline” (Seeck 1897–1920, i: preface). The thematically oriented chapters of the first few volumes were especially devoted to that objective: Seeck constructed an impressive scenario of decline that culminated in “the elimination of the best” (“die Ausrottung der Besten”: i. 269–307). The notion of “Ausrottung” referred to a series of negative choices, the beginning of which Seeck dated back to the time of the Gracchi. The ancient world, he argued, need not have come to an end. The collapse occurred only when, because of failures internal to Rome, the most industrious people had become a small minority, and when, because

of the laws of heredity, “inherited cowardice” and “moral weakening” had emerged as dominant characteristics of society.

Seeck's ideas were shaped by the evolutionary biology of the nineteenth century. Today, these theories may seem strange, occasionally even repulsive, but they are representative of the period. An entire generation of scholars tried to transfer the discoveries made by the natural sciences – more precisely, the theory of heredity – to the cultural evolution of mankind. Evolutionary biology turned into a paradigm of historical discovery. If individual humans could be seen as belonging to a more general chain of being, scholars were suddenly able to ask how important a role evolution and selection played in society. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, Darwin's theory of the descent of man was equally popular among left-wing politicians, liberal intellectuals, and conservative philosophers. The theory of the heredity of acquired characteristics brilliantly justified the middle-class ideology of achievement. A number of different, partly contradictory, theories were published, now usually classified as “social Darwinism.” These theories were combined with eugenic considerations, scientific reflections on population, racial deliberations, and ideas about social hygiene. Seeck's *Geschichte* can be understood only if one keeps this in mind. He combined and adapted individual pieces of research he came across in biology and related sciences and transferred them to the history of Late Antiquity. His account combines biological theory with a detailed event-oriented history based on a meticulous critical assessment of the sources (Rebenich 2000b).

Seeck's *Geschichte*, reprinted several times in quick succession – which indicates wide appreciation by a large audience – remained, however, the work of an outsider. His main thesis, “die Ausrottung der Besten,” met with disapproval among scholars. They only praised his adherence to the sources in describing political history. Most historians of antiquity in Germany, and also in other European countries, continued to make use of the concept of “decline” when interpreting Late Antiquity; but they thought of this decline as a complex process of political, social, and religious disintegration that had already started in the time of the empire itself, or even in the time of the republic. The process was often described in terms of denationalization, proletarianization, and orientalization. Many thought that the hostility of the Christians toward the state had been one of the causes of the crisis. Not only the Germanic peoples, but also the Catholic Church were regarded as the legitimate heirs to the Roman Empire. In an essay from 1885, for example, Harnack emphasized that “it [the Church] is indeed nothing else than the universal Roman Empire itself, but in the most wonderful and beneficent metamorphosis, built upon the Gospel as a kingdom of Jesus Christ: Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus triumphat” (Harnack 1906: 233).

A “Long” Late Antiquity

In 1901, the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl (1858–1905) published his *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, a work in which he first harnessed the aesthetics of the *fin de siècle* to the historical understanding of early Christian and late antique art. The distinction

between prosperity and decline, between the beautiful and the hideous, was abolished; the artistic style of the epoch was understood not as the product of a universal culture but as an autonomous phenomenon. Riegl did not regard the architecture and sculpture, painting and craftwork of the late empire as evidence for a barbaric style or a cultural decline, but as proof of a specific “artistic will.” This artistic will, which constituted a separate epochal style that continued to reflect its classical legacy, originated from a conviction directed toward the afterlife, and manifested itself in Christianity (Elsner 2002). Riegl defined Late Antiquity as an epoch delimited by the Edict of Milan (AD 313) and the accession of Charles the Great (AD 768). Students of the Later Roman Empire now began to adopt this periodization from art history. Seeck had thought of antiquity as ending with the political demise of the Western Roman Empire in AD 476. Eduard Meyer (1855–1930), however, defined Late Antiquity (in the second edition of his *magnum opus*, the *Geschichte des Altertums*) in a manner comparable to that of Riegl: as the transitional period between Diocletian and Charles the Great (Meyer 1910: 249). Similarly, Matthias Gelzer (1886–1974) described Late Antiquity in his programmatic lecture on “Classical Studies and Late Antiquity” (1926) as reaching from the third to the sixth centuries (Gelzer 1963: 387–400). Thus the notion of a “long” Late Antiquity had come into being, and the term “Late Antiquity” entered other European languages (“bas-empire,” “antiquité tardive,” “basso impero,” and “bajo imperio”).

From the turn of the century, representatives of the so-called “school of religious history” (*religionsgeschichtliche Schule*) consistently divorced ancient Christianity from the Christianity of other periods and described in more particular terms first the interaction of various forms of religious belief and practice in the ancient Mediterranean world, and second the earliest phases of the dissemination of the Christian message. Hermann Usener (1834–1905) had already recognized the significance of late classical lives of the saints for the study of both Christian and pagan antiquity. Shortly afterward, the so-called “Cambridge Ritualists” investigated (partly under the influence of Sir James Frazer, 1854–1941) the social function of religious rituals and their significance for the formation of group cohesion and group identity. The circle included Francis Cornford (1874–1943, married to Charles Darwin’s granddaughter) and Arthur B. Cook (1868–1952, author of *Zeus: A Study of Ancient Religion*, 1914–40), together with the Oxford scholar Gilbert Murray (1866–1957). Similar lines of inquiry had been pursued in France by Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). The Belgian Franz Cumont (1868–1947) and, slightly later, the English scholar Arthur Darby Nock (1902–63) contributed with exceptional distinction to the study of late antique religion (Bonnet 2005). One cannot overestimate the extent to which this research into religious history helped to overcome traditional denominational notions of ancient religions in general and of Christianity in particular (Graf 2002).

The Impact of Social and Economic History

In the twentieth century, the concept of Late Antiquity as a self-contained epoch was revised and, once again, utilized to cope with the crises of the time. The Protestant

theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) compared the culture toward the end of antiquity to the neohumanist movement at the time of Goethe, and demanded an intensive historical study of Late Antiquity in order to reestablish, in present-day Europe, the teachings of early Christianity and thereby to overcome the crisis of historicism (Troeltsch 1925: 65–121). With his extensive research program on the interaction between antiquity and Christianity, the Catholic religious historian Franz Josef Dölger (1879–1940) attempted to counter contemporary movements that rejected all adjustment of Christian tradition to modern times. After World War II, the Dölger-Institute – named after him – was founded in Bonn. Since 1950, it has been responsible for publishing the *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (Schöllgen 1993).

During the conflicts, controversies, and convulsions of the first half of the twentieth century, Late Antiquity was frequently referred to, both inside and outside the humanities, as providing an analogy to contemporary events. The epoch stood in the eyes of some as an admonition to the present. Manifest social contrasts in the nineteenth century and the ideas of historical materialism made various scholars more sensitive to aspects of social and economic history. The works of Max Weber (1864–1920) were of special significance for the analysis of the structure of late classical society (Nippel 2000). In an 1896 lecture on “The Social Reasons for the Decline of the Roman Empire” (Weber 1988: 289–311), and in his study on “Agrarian Conditions in Antiquity” (first published in the *Handwörterbuch der Staatswissenschaften* of 1909; see Weber 1988: 1–288), Weber identified, among other factors, the following reasons for the crisis: the equal status of slaves and free small-scale tenants; the decline of the cities and of the empire’s financial apparatus; the rise of a barter economy and the rapid bureaucratization of the administration; and the restriction of private economic initiative. He thus addressed several topics that were to be discussed in detail by scholars over the following years – some of them taking account of Weber’s position, others not. In his early writings, Weber had avoided any tendency to make the study of antiquity part of an analysis of current experience; but by 1909 he had come to regard the late Roman state as a frightening totalitarian vision of the future: “In all likelihood the bureaucratization of society will at some stage take control of capitalism in our civilization as it did in antiquity” (Weber 1988: 278). The pessimistic view of the epoch held during the second half of the nineteenth century had caught up with the social sciences of the twentieth century.

The Russian historian of antiquity Michael Iwanowitsch Rostovtzeff (1870–1952) also regarded Late Antiquity as a reflection of the present. The October Revolution of 1918 had forced him to flee first to Sweden and then to Oxford. In 1920 he accepted a professorship at the University of Wisconsin, Madison; and in 1925 he moved to Yale. His personal experiences as an immigrant influenced his epochal *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (1926). This work is a passionate plea for the social and political significance of a prosperous urban middle class that had provided the *Imperium Romanum* with its visible splendor and had indeed ruled it. According to Rostovtzeff, the period of crisis for the Roman Empire began in the third century and was accompanied by a decline of the traditional urban economy and a leveling of social classes. The idealization of the Roman “bourgeoisie” not only advanced the

historical study of the classical era and its political economy but also reflected the political anti-Bolshevism of the Russian bourgeoisie (Marccone 1999).

Late Antiquity and the Decline of Cultures

World War I and the Russian October Revolution intensified the atmosphere of desolation that had been spreading throughout the middle-class elite of Europe since the turn of the century. Many contemporaries believed that their own armed conflicts and ideological disputes marked the end of global hegemony for Europe, and they tried to come to terms with this realization by bringing once more to the fore a cyclical interpretation of history, for which the fall of Rome stood as a historic paradigm. The most important and influential work of this sort was Oswald Spengler's (1880–1936) *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918–22), which was influenced by Seeck's *Geschichte* as well as by the research of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*. Spengler interpreted Germany's military defeat as a symptom of the defeat of Europe as a whole. No more than a gentleman scholar, he based his interpretation of world history on the assumption that every culture, in accordance with some natural law, advanced through the ages of man and underwent three phases: development, prosperity, and decline. Spengler regarded the Battle of Actium in 31 BC as the event that marked the end of antiquity. After that came an intermediate period of 1,000 years without any development, which Spengler saw characterized by a "magic" or "Arabian" culture. The structure of this culture was still organized as it had been in antiquity; its nature was, according to Spengler, the product of a supposedly "oriental" influence. The fate of the empire, the crisis of Late Antiquity, and the turmoil of the *Völkerwanderung* were consequences of the ossification of a once lively ancient culture – a process that had begun under Augustus. Spengler's pseudo-scientific theory of the decline of cultures gave the past a modern touch, in order to aid the analysis of the political present. In the 1920s and 1930s, his absurd and offensive speculations fascinated not only sectors of the conservative and culturally pessimistic middle classes but also some students of the ancient world, who felt insecure due to the waning significance of their disciplines and the challenge presented by established scientific and political systems and who, consequently, wanted to restore to antiquity a forceful historical significance.

Some Italian and German scholars went on to support the fascist and National Socialist states, and individual ancient historians such as Wilhelm Weber (1882–1948) continued to interpret Late Antiquity by utilizing racist categories (Christ 1982: 210–21; 2006: 69–74). Outside Italy and Germany, however, the image of the late empire was very much governed by the then current experience of violence, occupation, and expulsion. Ernst Stein (1891–1945) published the first volume of his famous *Geschichte des spätromischen Reiches* in Vienna in 1928. After World War II, the work was translated into French, and a second volume was written in French (Stein 1949–59), for this highly esteemed liberal Jewish patriot of the Habsburg monarchy categorically refused to continue publishing in German after 1933.

In 1948, Pierre Courcelle (1912–80) published his *Histoire littéraire des grandes invasions germaniques*, in which numerous passages implied, or depended upon, reflection on the recent past. The account is divided into *invasion*, *occupation*, and *libération*. The Vandal Huneric sets up a “concentration camp [*camp de concentration*]” for rebellious Catholics (1948: 183), and Hilderic pursues intermittently a “policy of appeasement [*politique d’apaisement*]” (1948: 195). In his book *L’Empire chrétien*, written during the German occupation of France and first published in 1947, André Piganiol (1883–1968) disputed the theory of decadence and reestablished the disaster theory of the Italian humanists, who had considered the Germanic peoples as the destructive element responsible for the decline of the Roman Empire. Piganiol distanced himself from the National Socialist *Germanenverklärung*, the romanticization of the Germanic peoples, and made the famous point, “Roman civilization did not die of its own accord: it was assassinated” (1947: 422; 1972: 466). Arnaldo Momigliano aptly referred to this statement as the “*cri de coeur* of a valiant Frenchman against *boches* and collaborationists” (Momigliano 1969: 646).

New Paths to Late Antiquity

After the end of World War II, the decisive driving force behind research into Late Antiquity was supplied by English and French scholars. Henri-Irénée Marrou (1904–77) published his *Retractatio* in 1949, which exerted considerable influence. In it, he “retracted” (echoing Augustine himself) the central claim of his book *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, published a decade earlier (Riché 2003). Previously, Marrou had described the culture of Late Antiquity as decadent, ailing, and weak and had made Augustine into a *lettré de la décadence*. Now he openly declared that his former position had been wrong, and he acknowledged the cultural achievements of the epoch as innovative and trendsetting. He put aside the idea of a distinct break-up of – or an abrupt end to – the ancient world: instead, he preferred to speak of “internal changes that were in fact signs of that civilization’s vigour and vitality” (1949: 690). As a result, the way was made clear for a new evaluation of the cultural achievements and literary style of Late Antiquity, an evaluation echoed later in the work of Pierre Courcelle and Jacques Fontaine (Vessey 1998).

In England, a new era of research into Late Antiquity began in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is closely linked with the names of A. H. M. Jones (1904–70), Arnaldo Momigliano (1908–87), and Peter Brown (b. 1935). In 1964, having studied the period for many years, Jones published his three-volume work *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602: A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey*, which still provides the most reliable general account of the epoch (Gwynn, forthcoming). Jones had an excellent command of previous research and possessed an extensive knowledge of the sources; he painted a very diverse picture, distanced himself from monocausal attempts at explanation, examined a number of interacting factors that had, in his opinion, caused the decline of the Roman Empire, and helped to overcome the popular notion that the late empire was governed by coercion and despotism

(Meier 2003). He took into account the crisis of the economy and the tax burden, the decrease in population and the shortage of workers, the orientation of Christian teaching toward the afterlife and the bureaucratization of the administration, the barbarization of the army and the invasions by the Germanic tribes. Chiefly, however, it was “the increasing pressure of the barbarians, concentrated on the weaker western half of the empire, which caused the collapse” (Jones 1966: 370). Jones, like Marrou, also supported prosopographical research into Late Antiquity, an approach inspired to an important degree by Sir Ronald Syme’s studies of the early and high principate. Syme (1903–89) achieved for Roman history what Lewis Namier (1888–1960) had achieved in his studies of eighteenth-century Britain.

Equally momentous was a series of lectures held at the Warburg Institute in London in late 1958 and early 1959, on the initiative of Arnaldo Momigliano. In 1963, these lectures were published under the title *Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*. In his programmatic opening essay, Momigliano (1963a) discussed the controversial relationship between Christianity and paganism, demonstrated what a fertile field the period of Late Antiquity could be, questioned the traditional notion of the decline of the Roman Empire, and argued against the conventional dichotomy between secular and ecclesiastical history.

In 1971, building upon the accomplishments of more recent English and French works, and taking into account both anthropological research (such as that of Edward Evans-Pritchard and Mary Douglas) and the historiography of the *Annales* school (exemplified not least by Evelyne Patlagean), Peter Brown, who had previously become well known for his biography of Augustine (1967a), published his small but exceptionally popular book, *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971b). This work dramatically affected how a whole generation on both sides of the Atlantic perceived Late Antiquity (*Symbolae Osloenses* 1997: 5–90). Brown’s Late Antiquity extended from the third into the seventh century and embraced both the western provinces of the Roman Empire and Sasanian Iran. The periodization, “from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad,” called to mind the subtitle of Roger Rémondon’s *Crise de l’empire romain* (1964) but deliberately covered a longer period and dispensed with much of the *crise*. Brown did not talk about decline, and his Roman Empire did not collapse with the deposition of the last emperor in AD 476. Instead, he offered the impression of an intellectually, artistically, and religiously productive epoch, characterized by change, diversity, and creativity. The influence of the postwar Marrou is evident. Brown’s article “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity” (1971a), published in the same year, strengthened an already existing scholarly interest in the cults of saints and martyrs (deeply rooted in the Bollandist tradition represented by Hippolyte Delehaye, 1859–1941) and in the ascetic practice and religious experience of Late Antiquity (Elm 1998: 343–4; see Rousseau 1978, MacCormack 1981, and Stancliffe 1983).

The impact of these new approaches on both British and international research were profound (Averil Cameron 2002: 166–7; Liebeschuetz 2004: 260–1). In Britain, an older Oxbridge tradition of classical education was challenged; a tradition the representatives of which had not considered Late Antiquity to be part of classical antiquity and – under the influence of Gibbon – had dismissed the period as decadent.

For a while, in the British university system, the Late Roman Empire had been regarded as part of “modern” history. As early as 1889, J. B. Bury (1861–1927) had written a study of “the Later Roman Empire” from the reign of Arcadius to that of Irene. Shortly afterward, he also began to edit anew Gibbon’s masterpiece. By the time he published (1923) his influential *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian*, he was Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge. But the first edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, in which Bury had an important hand, ended at AD 324.

In Britain, a complex interweaving of historiographical trends characterized the intervening period since the late 1880s, featuring (for example) Sir Samuel Dill (1844–1924; see Dill 1899, 1926), W. P. Ker (1855–1923; see Ker 1904), T. R. Glover (1869–1943; see Glover 1901), and Hector Munro Chadwick (1870–1947; see Chadwick 1912). Almost any attempt at periodization has been challenged or abandoned for one reason or another, especially by those who wanted to retain Late Antiquity as part of classical studies (but see Stevens 1933), as can be deduced not only from lecture timetables at several British universities but also from the second edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, which contains two extensive volumes devoted to Late Antiquity that cover the period AD 337–600.

It is, however, not only in the English-speaking world that Late Antiquity has become a popular subject of a historical research that is characterized by a wide variety of methods and a paradigm shift. French, Italian, Greek, Austrian, Hungarian, and German scholars – for example, Andreas Alföldi, André Chastagnol, Evangelos Chrysos, Lellia Cracco-Ruggini, Alexander Demandt, Jean Gaudemet, Santo Mazzarino, Walter Pohl, Johannes Straub, Karl Friedrich Stroheker, and Herwig Wolfram – have also fostered our understanding of the Later Roman Empire. They have contributed over the past decades to what Andrea Giardina has described as a general “explosion” in late antique studies (Giardina 1999). The research into a “long” Late Antiquity has for the most part superseded the previous discourse on when and why the Roman Empire declined. Transformation, change, transition, and evolution are the favored epithets to apply to the epoch. Instead of a *caesura*, the historical continuum, the *longue durée*, is stressed. Cooperation between various disciplines has proven fruitful, with the consequence that sociological, anthropological, and gender-focused methodologies have successfully been applied to Late Antiquity. Marxist concepts, by contrast, have become less popular, following the perceived bankruptcy of some forms of socialism. The religious persuasion of a historian plays an insignificant role in what is now largely secularized research: an emphasis on cultural history considers religion as a cultural factor. Scholars are searching for the construction of “identities” and “ethnicities.” Even in a newly unified Europe, regional history is emphasized. In North America, where Brown eventually moved (first to Berkeley and then to Princeton) and where Late Antiquity is a focus of interest for scholars like Alan Cameron, John Matthews, Glen Bowersock, and Timothy Barnes, a multicultural and postcolonial discourse has dominated the study of the late empire. As a result, topics in institutional and administrative history are scarcely pursued, political history is not very popular, and even economic history interests only a few – Peter Garnsey (Garnsey 1998) and Chris Whittaker (Whittaker 1994) being notable exceptions.

The late twentieth century may come to be considered the heyday of late antique studies. Old certainties have been dislodged but, thanks in part to the very vividness of description involved, a path has also been left open to an enduring debate about the relevance of that remote era to an understanding of our modern world.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

At present, a comprehensive, methodically reflective, and current account of the history of research into Late Antiquity is not available. Liebeschuetz 2004 gives a first introduction to the topic in English. The preface in Herzog 1989: 38–44 is stimulating and informative. D'Elia 1967 and Demandt 1984 provide important summaries.