

## A Long Late Antiquity? Considerations on a Controversial Periodization

*Late Antiquity as a period has a complex history with moments when the issues pertaining to it seem to intensify. One of these was without a doubt the aftermath of World War I and reached its apex in 1923 during the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Brussels. The tragic events that had shaken Europe had a deep impact on historiography. In the aftermath of World War II, this trend was reversed on account of a progressive change of perspective and sensibility. The new trend in late antique studies is linked especially to the work of Henri-Irénée Marrou and, more recently, Peter Brown. Marrou is responsible for the acquisition of esthetic standards that promoted an appreciation for the literary and artistic values of Late Antiquity. The very innovative reading of Late Antiquity ("a long Late Antiquity") proposed by Brown also has had a great impact: on the one hand, Brown's reading has made useless a periodization based on historical events, and, on the other, it has rendered impossible the concepts of crisis and decline. Recently, however, periodization has made a comeback and the decline and fall of the Roman Empire again seems worthy of consideration.*

There was a time in the last years of the past century when Arnaldo Momigliano's view seemed too optimistic. In the opening of a famous essay, which he read at the Warburg Institute of London in 1959, he began with an observation that took for granted the universally accepted notion of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire: "I may perhaps begin with a piece of good news. In this year 1959 it can still be considered an historical truth that the Roman Empire declined and fell."<sup>1</sup> But in 1982, Peter Brown, a scholar who had a decisive influence on late antique studies and had been a student of Momigliano, questioned the significance of this observation, writing: "The problem of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire may not be relevant to

<sup>1</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano, "Christianity and the Decline of the Roman Empire," in A. Momigliano, ed., *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 79–99 at 79.

western man's image of himself and his society. Gibbon could write about the Roman Empire because the society of pre-western Europe was still close enough to that of the Roman world to understand that world . . . We have moved to more dangerous times to which the Roman Empire and its dilemmas are irrelevant."<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of the third millennium the unpleasant truth that the Roman Empire declined and fell again seems worthy of consideration. The preceding millennium apparently has ended on a positive note with a growing consensus, especially in the US, with regard to the optimistic views that, following in the footsteps of Peter Brown himself, dismissed the very idea of decline for the ancient world.<sup>3</sup> A very broad periodization of Late Antiquity, which did not leave any room for political or economic events as such, was useful to a perspective that privileged the concept of "transformation" or "transition," that is, the gradual, smooth, and non-traumatic passage from the ancient to what usually is known as the medieval world. The following observation, which is found in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Post-Classical World*, a collection of essays edited by illustrious scholars to which I shall return later, can be taken as the manifesto of a historiographical trend: "The time has come for scholars, students, and the educated public in general to treat the period between around 250 and 880 CE as a distinctive and quite decisive period that stands on its own."<sup>4</sup>

But a reaction to this trend already had manifested itself in the criticism against a periodization of Late Antiquity that was considered too extensive—criticism born within Italian historiography, upon which the legacy of historical-economic thinking (too often dismissed by some rash Anglo-Saxon scholars as Marxism) continues to exercise a positive influence.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in truth, some prominent British scholars already had distanced themselves from

<sup>2</sup> Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), 62. I am not sure why Brown talked about "more dangerous times" with regard to the last decades of the past century, but I do not think that he was referring specifically to political questions.

<sup>3</sup> In Andrea Carandini et al., eds., *Storia di Roma*, vol.3, 1–2 *L'età tardoantica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), it is worth emphasizing the radically different opinions expressed by Lellia Cracco Ruggini and Andrea Carandini respectively, especially because such difference is ignored. In the introduction to the first of two volumes on Late Antiquity, Lellia Cracco Ruggini, "Il Tardoantico: Per una tipologia dei punti critici," in pt. 1: *Crisi e trasformazioni*, 33–44, shows a very optimistic attitude similar to that of Peter Brown and of American historiography in general, whereas the view expressed by Carandini, in pt. 2, *I luoghi e le culture*, preface, is radically pessimistic, see also Andrea Carandini, "L'ultima civiltà sepolta o del massimo oggetto desueto, secondo un archeologo," *ibid.*, 11–38.

<sup>4</sup> Glen W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, Oleg Grabar, eds., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Post-Classical World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), ix.

<sup>5</sup> See Andrea Giardina, "Esplosione di tardoantico," in G. Mazzoli, F. Gasti, eds., *Prospettive sul Tardoantico. Atti del Convegno di Pavia 27–28 novembre 1997* (Como: New Press, 1999),

the more extreme positions of their American colleagues by expressing the same criticism of an excessively extensive periodization.<sup>6</sup>

In this first decade of the twenty-first century, one can see how the historical revisionism, which Peter Brown successfully started in 1971 with his innovative *The World of Late Antiquity*, now encounters some difficulties and a renewed opposition. The “Vanishing Paradigm of the Fall of Rome,” brilliantly evoked by Glen Bowersock,<sup>7</sup> seems destined to become real again. The fact that two British scholars published in the same year (2005) two books different in their approach but with the word “Fall” referring to Rome and the Roman Empire in their title, cannot simply be a coincidence.<sup>8</sup> To these a third monograph can be added, which naively takes up the title of the classic of Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.<sup>9</sup>

One of these two monographs, by Peter Heather, fundamentally a military historian, develops a thesis that can be considered at the same time traditional, because it is in agreement with positions long accepted, and original, because it is far removed from the predominant tendencies in current historiography. According to Heather, the arrival of the Huns in western Eurasia caused a series of upheavals among the populations on which

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9–30 = *Studi Storici* 40 (1999), 157–180; A. Marcone, “La Tarda Antichità o della difficoltà delle periodizzazioni,” *Studi Storici* 45 (2004), 25–36.

<sup>6</sup> See especially J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, “Late Antiquity and the Concept of Decline,” *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 45 (2001), 1–11; Idem, “The Uses and Abuses of the Concept of ‘Decline’ in Later Roman History or was Gibbon Politically Incorrect?,” in L. Lavan, ed., *Recent Research in Late Antique Urbanism*, (Portsmouth, NH: *Journal of Roman Archaeology* suppl. vol.42, 2001), 233–245; Averil Cameron, “The ‘Long’ Late Antiquity: A Late Twentieth Century Model,” in T.P. Wiseman, ed., *Classics in Progress. Essays on Ancient Greece and Rome* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 165–191; Andrea Giardina, *Préface* to M.-H. Quet, ed., *La «crise» de l’Empire romain. De Marc-Aurèle à Constantin* (Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2006), 11–18; Idem, “The Transition to Late Antiquity,” in J. Scheidel, ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 743–768. See also G. Traina, *428 dopo Cristo. Storia di un anno* (Rome-Bari, 2007). I find Traina’s position impossible to share: in an attempt to avoid the contraposition between supporters of continuity and discontinuity respectively, he writes that both “make an impressionistic use of the sources, which they approach for the purpose of supporting their theories” (p. xiii).

<sup>7</sup> Glen W. Bowersock, “The Vanishing Paradigm of the Fall of Rome,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 49 (1996), 29–43 = Idem, *Selected Papers in Late Antiquity* (Bari, 2000), 187–197.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: a New History* (London: Macmillan 2005) (Ital. tr., Milan: Garzanti [2006]); Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), on which see Garth Fowden, “410 and All That,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 19 (2006), 706–708, according to whom Ward-Perkins “is engaged in a polemic against a school of history that emphasizes cultural values and indeed continuities” (p. 708). I am not sure whether Ward-Perkins intended to refer back to the beginning of Momigliano’s essay by entitling the first chapter of his book: “Did Rome ever Fall?”

<sup>9</sup> J.W. ERMATERING, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Westport/London, 2004).

the Huns exercised their pressure. As a consequence, these populations were forced to seek refuge within the boundaries of the Roman Empire; for a series of reasons, the Roman Empire was unable to manage the new situation and organize an efficient system of military defense. Soon the Huns themselves turned out to be useless for the purpose of the military defense of the empire, and all attempts at preserving the western Roman Empire as a political structure ceased in 476.<sup>10</sup>

The book of Brian Ward-Perkins deserves greater attention. Ward-Perkins has published a number of fundamental studies on public buildings in Late Antiquity and already has dealt systematically with the problem of the transition between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.<sup>11</sup> In these earlier studies, Ward-Perkins acknowledged important forms of continuity between the two ages, but he now seems unwilling to make any concession to the concept of continuity. His position is stated firmly and explicitly and is reminiscent of Piganiol's famous view with regard to the "assassination" of Roman civilization: "I defend the right of historians to use difficult words like 'civilization' and 'crisis'; I have used 'decline' in this negative sense, very explicitly, because I believe a great deal was lost with the end of ancient sophistication . . . The end of the Roman west witnessed horrors and dislocation of a kind I sincerely hope never to have to live through; and it destroyed a complex civilization, throwing the inhabitants of the west back to a standard of living typical of prehistoric times. Romans before the fall were as certain as we are today that their world would continue forever substantially unchanged. They were wrong. We would be wise not to repeat their complacency."<sup>12</sup>

We are confronted, therefore, with a scholar interested in reviving the idea of the crisis of the Roman Empire as the classical paradigm for every decline, an idea that, according to the classical explanation formulated by Arnaldo Momigliano, can be used as a warning for the contemporary western world: "From the eighteenth century onward we have been obsessed with the Fall of the Roman Empire: this fall has become the archetype of every decline and,

<sup>10</sup> This point is underscored by James J. O'Donnell in his review in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (2005.07.69).

<sup>11</sup> Bryan Ward-Perkins, *From Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Urban Public Building in Northern and Central Italy, AD 300–850* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984). It is worth mentioning the debate over the possibility of taking 410 CE as a fundamental turning point especially for Rome, particularly from the point of urban and art history; see B. Brenk, "L'anno 410 e il suo effetto sull'arte chiesastica a Roma," in *Ecclesiae Urbis. Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Studi sulle chiese di Roma (IV–X secolo), Roma, 4–10 settembre 2000* (Vatican: Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, 2002), 1001–1016; Richard Brilliant, "After 410," *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 18 (2004), 71–79.

<sup>12</sup> Ward-Perkins, *Fall*, 182–183.

therefore, the symbol of our fears.”<sup>13</sup> This attitude is reflected in the catalogue of 210 causes of decline of the Roman Empire assembled by Alexander Demandt in 1984, which can arouse both shock and skepticism.<sup>14</sup> And the problem of decline hardly can be seen as foreign to contemporary sensibility and, therefore, as something limited to erudite historiography.

There are no concessions on the part of Ward-Perkins to the idea of a peaceful “accommodation” of Germanic peoples allowed in by the Roman Empire, a strategy that caused the end of the Roman Empire almost unwittingly. A theory proposed separately but in similar terms by Walter Goffart and Jean Durliat maintains that the essential character of barbarian settlements lay in the government’s concession of tax revenues to barbarians.<sup>15</sup> A settlement of this kind did not presuppose the parceling out of Roman estates but simply the reassignment of the tax revenues deriving from them. The Latin term *hospitalitas* did not indicate the sharing of land, but, according to Goffart, pointed to the special condition of the barbarian who was a “guest” of the owner and received from the owner a portion of the tax revenues.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> A. Momigliano, “La caduta senza rumore di un Impero nel 476 d.C.,” *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, 3 (1973), 397–418 = Idem, *Sesto Contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1980), 159–179. See also Alexander Demandt, “Der Untergang Roms als Menetekel,” in Idem, ed., *Geschichte der Geschichte. Wissenschaftshistorische Essays* (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: 1997), 39–59. Contra Bowersock, *Vanishing Paradigm*, 196, “Now in 1985 it is probably fair to say that no responsible historian of the ancient or the medieval world would want to address or acknowledge the fall of Rome as either fact or paradigm.”

<sup>14</sup> See Alexander Demandt, *Der Fall Roms. Die Auflösung des Reiches im Urteil der Nachwelt* (Munich, 1984). The character of the book is both peculiar and intriguing. Among the causes of the fall of the Roman Empire (up until the publication of the book, as the author points out ironically) we find: “Bleivergiftung, Entwaldung, Frauenemanzipation, Homosexualität, Hyperthermia, etc.,” which received some rightly ironic commentary. Apart from some clearly paradoxical elements, Demandt’s work is indicative of the rapid change of mental attitude and disposition that is taking place even in the USA, where the theme of decline is an object of serious consideration perhaps for the first time, as a consequence of September 11 and the following events. Consequently, the reflections noted above with which Peter Brown distanced himself from the “paradigm of every decline,” seem irremediably outdated.

<sup>15</sup> See Walter Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans. The Techniques of Accommodation* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), and Idem, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); J. Durliat, “Le salaire de la paix sociale dans les royaumes barbares,” in H. Wolfram, A. Schwarcz, eds., *Anerkennung und Integration: Zu den wirtschaftlichen Grundlagen der Völkerwanderungszeit (400–600)* (Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1988), 21–72.

<sup>16</sup> According to Goffart, this would explain why no complaints on the part of expropriated landowners are documented. This process (*hospitalitas*) was less burdensome for the owner and would have avoided any complication deriving from the necessity of dividing large properties into smaller units. The system of *hospitalitas* had been conceived not by the barbarians, but by the Roman government in order to look after the interests of the Romans, not the barbarians. According to Goffart, it is not necessary to assume that the system had the purpose of defending the land

Thanks also to this theory, it is easy to understand how the Germans have been “elevated” to the rank of peaceful collaborators with the native Romans. There might be a connection between the minimalist interpretation of the barbarian invasions and the new political and cultural context in Europe, whose roots have been sought from the sixties onward in the Carolingian Age and, therefore, in a post-Roman Europe dominated by the Franks, the common ancestors of the French and Germans.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, this is the approach followed in the project promoted by the European Science Foundation and devoted to the topic “Transformation of the Roman World,” where, as an example of a position antithetical to that expressed by Ward-Perkins, Walter Pohl states, “There is no hint here of invasion or force, nor even that the Roman Empire came to an end; instead there is a strong suggestion that the newcomers fitted easily into a continuing and evolving Roman world.”<sup>18</sup> The concept of ethnogenesis is in turn the expression of a tendency to see the creation of socio-political organizations in the Romano-barbaric kingdoms as a fluid process, just as it also implies a fundamental rejection of any ethnic or racial nationalism.

No other work is more indicative of the current tendency to relativize the divide between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages and overcome the “Romanocentric and Eurocentric”<sup>19</sup> premises than the already cited collective volume *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Post-Classical World*, and it comes as no surprise that the volume was conceived at Princeton by Glen Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar.<sup>20</sup> The volume offers an excellent example of a historiographical perspective that sees the post-classical world as polycentric.<sup>21</sup>

*Late Antiquity* covers the period between the second half of the third century and the end of the eighth century and the geographic area including

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from internal rebels. On the contrary, because of depopulation and the lack of manpower, it must not have been difficult to settle the newcomers in the territories assigned to them.

<sup>17</sup> See G.P. Brogiolo’s review of Ward-Perkins in *Archeologia Medievale* 32 (2005), 499–502, at 501, which emphasizes this possibility.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Pohl, “Introduction: The Empire and the Integration of Barbarians,” in Idem, ed., *Kingdoms of the Empire. The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity*, The Transformation of the Roman World, vol.1 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1–12 at 9.

<sup>19</sup> See Cracco Ruggini, “Tardoantico,” who declares optimistically that “culture is no longer aristocratic, imperialistic, or colonialist.” See also the contributions of G.W. Bowersock, L. Cracco Ruggini, A. Marcone, A. Schiavone, A. Giardina in E. Lo Cascio, ed., “Gli ‘spazi’ del Tardoantico. Atti della tavola rotonda di Capri, 11 ottobre 2000,” *Studi Storici* 45 (2004), 5–46. The most important essay for the current debate is that of Giardina, “Esplosione.”

<sup>20</sup> Glen W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, Oleg Grabar, *Late Antiquity. A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> See also J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, “Late Antiquity, The Rejection of ‘Decline’ and Multiculturalism in Decline and Change in Late Antiquity.” *Religion, Barbarians and their Historiography* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2006).

the Mediterranean, the Islamic Near East, and Iran. It is no surprise that the notion of “crisis” is not mentioned in the work. The idea of decline is incompatible with the general lines of the volume and is rejected explicitly for two reasons. On the one hand, the reformed empire of Diocletian and Constantine is presented as the most formidable political organization ever created in antiquity, which managed to survive intact in the east until the second half of the seventh century. On the other hand, the Sasanians achieved a similar result in Iran, and the Abbasids in Baghdad created the last great empire of antiquity. The introduction of the volume is a declaration of historiographical optimism. The work “has been put together on the frank assumption that the time has come for scholars, students, and the educated public in general to treat the period between around 250 and 800 as a distinctive and quite decisive period of history that stands on its own. Not only did Late Antiquity last over half a millenium; much of what was created in that period still runs in our veins” (that is, in western as well as Jewish and Arabic culture). Here, Late Antiquity’s distinctiveness did not arise from a clear break with the past—Late Antiquity does not represent a different reality but is directly derived from the ancient world—but from the transformations that it encompassed and from the fact that even realities that were external to the ancient or classical world were decisively influenced by the transformations that took place in it.

At the heart of *Late Antiquity* there is the fascinating notion of an age in which different cultures and religions were able to tolerate one another and to become integrated on account of a common background; the following statement well summarizes that idea: “It has long been recognized that the late antique period stands at the crossroads of many histories.” European historians are probably less comfortable with these many histories than their American colleagues and less inclined to grasp and appreciate the creativity of cultural assimilation.<sup>22</sup> The same is true for common categories such as “crisis” and “transformation.” The precariousness of any kind of historical periodization is based upon two different elements: the historical research that precedes it and the different sensibility that different cultures and ages have for their past.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> I had thought about writing a collective review of *Late Antiquity*, but never realized the project because of the understandable reservations expressed by the Italian colleagues (literary scholars, historians, archeologists) whose help I sought.

<sup>23</sup> Among the observations on this theme, that of A. Heuss deserves special attention both because of its originality and because it has been ignored for the most part. See A. Heuss, *Antike und Spätantike*, in J. Kunisch, ed., *Spätzeit. Studien zu den Problemen eines historischen Epochenbegriffs* (Berlin, 1990), 27–90 = Idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol.2 (Stuttgart, 1995), 1375–1438; see also Idem, *Römische Geschichte* (Paderborn-München, 1998), 601–611. Note also J. Bleicken,

The past few decades have witnessed a profound change in our attitude toward the ancient world or, rather, toward the subtle chronological boundary between antiquity and the Middle Ages. This boundary has grown progressively weaker, whereas elements of continuity increasingly have been emphasized. The new periodization has gained, if not an altogether new age, at least a period with well-defined characteristics. After losing all negative connotations, and no longer considered simply as a period of delicate transition between the ancient and the medieval worlds, Late Antiquity has found its place in historiographical consciousness, and on account of its distinctive characters it has gained complete autonomy within the historical cycles. The change in name—Late Antiquity instead of Bas-Empire (“low empire”)—reflects the image of an age bearing positive contributions that could not be understood in a context purely of decline.

But the question is not as simple as that. First, the terminology itself is problematic on account of the historical circumstances under which it was created. Moreover, every language has its own internal constraints that must be taken into account. The definition of the last centuries of the Roman Empire as Bas-Empire first appeared in the eighteenth century in the work of the French historian Charles Lebeau.<sup>24</sup> The expression “Late Antiquity” (German *Spätantike*) is far more recent and was invented about a hundred years ago by the art historian Alois Riegl, who employed it for the first time in the introduction to a catalogue of textiles, *Die ägyptische Textilfunde im K.K. Österreichischen Museum*.<sup>25</sup> The expression was successful and from the beginning of the twentieth century was used to describe a new phase for describing artistic evolution. With regard to the “new sense of space” that began to assert itself in the age of Constantine, Riegl was aware that he was penetrating “an unexplored territory” that long had been the “dark continent on the atlas of art historical scholarship.”<sup>26</sup> The fundamental novelty in the

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*Prinzipat und Dominat. Gedanken zur Periodisierung der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Frankfurt, 1977) = Idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol.2 (Stuttgart, 1998), 817–842.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Lebeau, *Histoire du Bas-Empire en commençant à Constantin le Grand*, 27 vols. (1757–1811; repr. with additions Paris: Didot, 1824–1836). The so-called “querelle des mots” is seen as “un peu désuète” by André Chastagnol, *L'évolution politique, sociale et économique du monde romain de Dioclétien à Julien*, 284–363. *La mise en place du régime du Bas-Empire* (284–363) (Paris, 1982), 7–12. And see the considerations of Jean-Michel Carrié in J.-M. Carrié, Aline Rousselle, *L'Empire romain en mutation: Des Sévères à Constantin* (Paris, 1999), 9–25.

<sup>25</sup> *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Museum für Kunst und Industrie* 2 (1889), 15ff.

<sup>26</sup> Alois Riegl, *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn* (Vienna: K.K. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1901 and 1927), L. Collobi Ragghianti, Ital. tr. (Turin, 1959), 4–5. Note another earlier use of the term by J. Strzygowski, a member of the so-called “school of Vienna” and author of *Orient oder Rom. Beiträge zur Geschichte der spätantiken und frühchristlichen Kunst* (Leipzig, 1901). Influenced by the impressionistic movement, F. Wickhoff, another member of the school, discovered the illusionistic nature of Roman art; his main work,

art of that period is determined by an original “Kunstwollen,” which is itself a synthesis of expressive desires and sensibilities that are rooted in the classical tradition, but evidently separate from it.

At the root of this recognition of Late Antiquity as a distinct age there was a consideration of esthetic nature, of “taste,” if that is the proper translation of “Kunstwollen.”<sup>27</sup> It is easy to understand that this kind of assumption makes the chronological limits of the period rather unsure depending on the elements of rupture with the past that one chooses to emphasize. Whereas the Lombard invasion in the west and the reign of Justinian were considered as the final phase of Late Antiquity, because at that point all echoes of classical art ceased, it has been more difficult to set its beginning. The tetrarchy, the reign of Constantine, or, earlier, the Severan Age, were seen in turn as watersheds between two different but comparable periods. In the work of Oswald Spengler, which is emblematic of a certain tendency, the term “Altertum” appears only in quotation marks, as to indicate that any sharp distinction between antiquity/Middle Ages/modern age had become outdated.<sup>28</sup>

“Late Antiquity” as a period has a complex history with moments when the issues pertaining to it seem to intensify. One of these moments was without a doubt the aftermath of World War I and reached its apex in 1923 during the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Brussels. The tragic events that had shaken Europe had a deep impact on historiography. The troublesome concept of decline and crisis, of “Untergang,” was predominant in the works of scholars such as Spengler, and Ortega and Gasset, and also was manifested in discussions of the causes of the decline of the Roman Empire.<sup>29</sup> Works as famous and well-received as Rostovtzeff’s *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, which was announced at that congress, put great emphasis on the idea of a great and irreversible decline of the Roman Empire from the third century onward and openly suggested analogies with the condition of Europe.<sup>30</sup>

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*Die Wiener Genesis*, was published in 1895 in Vienna; on this, see R. Bianchi Bandinelli, *Storicità dell'arte classica* (Bari, 1973), 312–319.

<sup>27</sup> In Maria Andaloro, ed., *L'orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immagini* (312–468) (Milan, 2006), devoted to medieval painting in Rome, the chronological limits are 312–468; although the volume concerns Late Antiquity, in the introduction the editor introduces the concept of “postantico” at least with regard to images.

<sup>28</sup> See A. Demandt, “Spengler und die Spätantike,” in P.C. Ludz, ed., *Spengler heute* (Munich, 1980), 25–48 = Idem, *Geschichte der Geschichte*, 60–80.

<sup>29</sup> See A. Marcone, “La tarda antichità e le sue periodizzazioni,” *Rivista Storica Italiana* 112 (2000), 318–334.

<sup>30</sup> See Michael I. Rostovtzeff, “La crise politique et sociale de l’Empire romain du III siècle après J.C.,” *Musée Belge* 27 (1923), 233–242 = Arnaldo Marcone, ed., *Scripta Varia. Ellenismo e Impero Romano* (Bari, 1995), 163–169.

In the aftermath of World War II, this trend was reversed on account of a progressive change of perspective and sensibility. The new trend in late antique studies is linked especially to the work of Henri-Irénée Marrou and, more recently, Peter Brown. Marrou is responsible for the acquisition of esthetic standards that promoted an appreciation for the literary along with the artistic values of Late Antiquity. The “Retractatio” included by Marrou at the end of his *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* proposes that the notion of decline does not hold up when applied to late antique culture.<sup>31</sup> The debate became more intense in the sixties and has remained alive to this day, when the need for a reassessment cannot be postponed. Santo Mazzarino, who wrote a penetrating essay of historiographical analysis,<sup>32</sup> proposed the so-called “democratizzazione della cultura” [“democratization of culture”] as an interpretive key for Late Antiquity that became rightly famous.<sup>33</sup> Momigliano was quick to understand that the scholarly climate had changed and alluded to it on various occasions.<sup>34</sup> In the “shadow of Momigliano” a guerrilla war of a sort was gathering steam, although one can assume that it went well beyond his expectations. Such war was aimed at conquering new and still unexplored territories. Peter Brown’s *The Making of Late Antiquity* can be considered emblematic.<sup>35</sup> To this day, Brown’s book is a necessary point of reference in the discussion, whether one agrees with it or not.<sup>36</sup> In an essay with the provocative title “Esplosione di Tardontico,” Andrea Giardina pointed out some largely diffused reservations regarding Brown’s position.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>31</sup> The first edition of *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* appeared in 1938, the second in 1949. Marrou’s delightful *Décadence romaine ou Antiquité tardive? IIIe–VIe siècles* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977) seals this turning point.

<sup>32</sup> *La fine del mondo antico* (Milan, 1959) (= Milan, 1988); and previously, Idem, *Storia romana e storiografia moderna* (Naples, 1954).

<sup>33</sup> “La democratizzazione della cultura nel Basso Impero” was the title of a presentation by Santo Mazzarino at the XI Congrès Internationale des Sciences Historiques at Stockholm in 1960 = Santo Mazzarino, *Il basso impero. Antico, tardoantico ed èra costantiniana*, vol.1 (Bari: Dedalo, 1974), 74–98. On the success of this interpretive paradigm, see the “Atti del Convegno di Vercelli, 14–15 giugno 2000,” *Antiquité Tardive* 9 (2001), 24–295. The lively contemporary interest in ethnic identity is consistent with Mazzarino’s idea about the “democratizzazione della cultura”: see, e.g., R. Miles, ed., *Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity* (London, 1999). But already F. Millar, *The Roman Empire and its Neighbours*, 2nd ed. (London, 1981), had acknowledged the emergence of local cultures in the third century.

<sup>34</sup> Especially important is A. Momigliano, ed., *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963), the proceedings of a meeting that took place in 1959 at the Warburg Institute in London.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity. From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* (London, 1971).

<sup>36</sup> *Symbolae Osloenses* 72 (1997), “Report,” 5–30. See also his “Reply to Comments,” *ibid.*, 70–79.

<sup>37</sup> Giardina, “Esplosione.”

Equally important has been the historiographical reconsideration of Pirenne's *Mohammed et Charlemagne* in the last few years.<sup>38</sup>

The position of Andrea Giardina fits well within the Italian historiographical tradition, as shown by the following example. Twice in less than 40 years, in the context of the prestigious *Settimane Spoleatine di Studio dell'Alto Medioevo*, the problem of periodization has been the theme of the inaugural lecture. In April of 1961 the medievalist Ernesto Sestan considered the question, and the English scholar Averil Cameron did so in April of 1997; one also should not forget the contribution of Salvatore d'Elia, "Problemi di periodizzazione fra Tardo Antico e Alto Medioevo."<sup>39</sup> A passage from Sestan's contribution deserves to be quoted here, because it still is partially relevant: "The recurring uncertainties and difficulties in the periodization imply, if not a condemnation, at least a major objection to the theory that presupposes a catastrophic break between antiquity and the Middle Ages. One does not need complicated argumentation to understand that the 'catastrophic' theory implies a period of transition much quicker than the theory of continuity would. By connecting all transformations so slowly that all changes are perceived only at the beginning or at the end of the process, continuity stretches much longer over time and leaves greater room for periodization. If that is the case—and I think it is—one cannot but agree in essence with the theory of continuity, notwithstanding the doubts and risks that it implies in its most unbending and uncompromising formulation."<sup>40</sup>

In 1997 Averil Cameron, probably the British scholar most keenly aware of certain limitations of British historiography, lucidly wrote: "The Middle Ages have been pushed back; they no longer start either with the Germanic invasions or with the Arab conquest, and on this scenario even Islam becomes part of and integral to the world of Late Antiquity." And realizing that Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages "can no longer be seen to be separable entities" on account of the increasing difficulty in establishing a clear chronological watershed, she came to a self-critical conclusion,

<sup>38</sup> See, inter alios, R. Hodges, D. Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe*, 2nd ed. (London, 1989); Paolo Delogu, "Alle origini della tesi Pirenne," *Bullettino dell'Istituto storico Italiano per il Medio Evo* 100 (1995/96), 297–325; Giuseppe Petralia, "A proposito dell'immortalità di 'Maometto e Carlomagno' (o di Costantino)," *Storica* 1 (1995), 37–87.

<sup>39</sup> Salvatore d'Elia, "Problemi di periodizzazione fra Tardo Antico e Alto Medioevo," in *La cultura in Italia fra Tardo Antico e Alto Medioevo Atti del Convegno tenuto a Roma, Consiglio nazionale delle ricerche, dal 12 al 16 novembre 1979* (Rome: Herder, 1981), 63–98; also S. d'Elia, *Metamorfosi e fine del mondo antico (III–VII sec. d.C.)* (Naples, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> Ernesto Sestan, "Tardoantico e Alto Medievale: Difficoltà di una periodizzazione," *Atti dei Convegni del Centro Italiano di studi sul Basso Medioevo*, vol. 9 (Spoleto, 1962), 15–37 at 18 = Idem, *Italia medievale* (Naples, 1968), 1–21.

“Perhaps we are trying to do too much. Perhaps we have dissolved our very subject.”<sup>41</sup>

Peter Brown, in turn, puts before the debate on *The World of Late Antiquity* mentioned above a series of retrospective considerations worthy of mention here. Brown emphasizes how Marrou’s *Retractatio* and Piganiol’s *L’Empire chrétien* influenced his encounter with Late Antiquity. And, consequently, he cites William Frend’s *The Donatist Church* as the book that he found most congenial as a synthesis of phenomena, such as political and ecclesiastical history, that had been treated separately up to that point.<sup>42</sup> As far as his methodological innovations are concerned, the most evident and delicate—as Brown suggests with his inimitable style and some understandable self-satisfaction—are those deriving from the use of historical psychology and, ultimately, psychoanalysis.<sup>43</sup> It is evident that the new territories that Brown was preparing to conquer were totally independent of any kind of periodization. Already from the perspective of cultural history a periodization was difficult, but it was simply impossible with regard to the history of mentality and the kind of cultural history followed by Brown. The chronological limits proposed in the *World of Late Antiquity* (Marcus Aurelius to Mohammed) seem rather provisional; even Burckhardt went back to the second century in order to explain the change in mentality that took place in the reign of Constantine.<sup>44</sup>

Momigliano, with his incomparable capacity for bringing problems into focus, already had diminished the dramatic impact of the arrival of the barbarians and acknowledged the capacity for the assimilation of Christianity and its appeal for having been able to absorb fundamental elements of classical civilization.<sup>45</sup> Brown, in turn, made us familiar with the charismatic and the demonic and with the “invisible friends” capable of satisfying the needs

<sup>41</sup> Averil Cameron, “The Perception of Crisis,” in *Morfologie sociali e culturali in Europa fra Tarda Antichità e Alto Medioevo, Spoleto 3–9 aprile 1997*, Atti dei convegni del Centro Italiano di studi sul Basso Medioevo, vol. 45 (Spoleto 1998), 9–31 at 30–31.

<sup>42</sup> W.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church. A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

<sup>43</sup> Points of reference for Brown’s work are E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety. Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1965), as well as Melanie Klein’s writings and works of anthropology by Mary Douglas and Edward Evans-Pritchard, on which see the contribution of A. Giardina, “Tardoantico,” in *Enciclopedia Italiana*, “Appendice 5” (Rome, 1995), 392–393 and, especially, Idem, *Esplosione*.

<sup>44</sup> See Glen Bowersock, “Burckhardt sulla Tarda Antichità: dal ‘Constantin’ alla ‘Griechische Kulturgeschichte,’” *Rivista Storica Italiana* 112 (2000), 1094–1108.

<sup>45</sup> Peter Brown himself has offered the most penetrating analysis of Momigliano’s work: “Arnaldo Dante Momigliano, 1908–1987,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 74 (1988), 405–442; see also A. Marcone, “Un treno per Ravenna. Il contributo di Arnaldo Momigliano agli studi tardoantichi,” *Antiquité Tardive* 10 (2002), 291–298.

of the individual. And the individual rather than society has become the preferred object of research even with regard to collective psychology.<sup>46</sup>

The very innovative reading of Late Antiquity proposed by Brown has had a great impact: with regard to the idea of a “long” Late Antiquity, Averil Cameron speaks in no uncertain terms of a “Brownian model” and “Brownian view.”<sup>47</sup> On the one hand, Brown’s reading has made useless a periodization based on historical events, and, on the other, it has rendered impossible the concept of crisis as much as that of decline. Bowersock brilliantly summarized this tendency in the article mentioned above with its programmatic title, “The Vanishing Paradigm of Rome.”<sup>48</sup> As shown by the titles of new meetings and series, concepts such as “transition,” “transformation,” or “passage” have become more popular perhaps because they are more reassuring.<sup>49</sup>

The question is complicated by the fact that, both as a consequence of this kind of approach and because of more general trends, we have witnessed a progressive weakening of any vigorous philological approach and rigorous analysis of the sources so essential to the study of ancient history.<sup>50</sup> This observation applies both to literary and to archaeological sources, which are appreciated more for their symbolic function as models of social behavior than for their documentary importance. Historiographical texts in particular often are treated with suspicion, because they are perceived as an expression of the mentality of the elite that produced them independently from their veracity and their chronological proximity to the events that they narrate.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> The fundamental essay is Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *JRS* 61 (1971), 80–101, followed by Idem, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981). On the latter, see J. Howard-Johnson, P.A. Hayward, eds., *The Cult of the Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999).

<sup>47</sup> Av. Cameron, “Perceptions,” 176, 190, where Bowersock nonetheless wonders whether this model will survive.

<sup>48</sup> On Bowersock, *Selected Papers*, and on Cl. Lepelley, *Aspects de l’Afrique romaine. Les cités, la vie rurale, le christianisme* (Bari, 2001), published in the same series, see the contributions in *Rivista Storica Italiana* 114 (2002).

<sup>49</sup> Note, e.g., the title of the proceedings of the congress that met in Rome in 1997: W.V. Harris, ed., *The Transformations of Urbs Roma in Late Antiquity* (Portsmouth, NH: *JRA Suppl.*, 1999); see also *Passaggio dal mondo antico al Medioevo da Teodosio a san Gregorio Magno* (Rome: Accad. Naz. dei Lincei, 1980). The general title of the University of California Press series of monographs supervised by Brown is “The Transformation of the Classical Heritage,” and that of the aforementioned European Science Foundation project is “The Transformation of the Roman World.”

<sup>50</sup> It is surprising that this phenomenon has not attracted any attention so far.

<sup>51</sup> See C. La Rocca, “La trasformazione del territorio in Occidente,” in *Morfologie culturali*, 257–290.

This tendency is the exact opposite of the tendency predominant in studies on archaic Rome, in which the historical sources are of the utmost importance.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, new theories have been formulated with regard to social relations, taxation, barbarian invasions, and so on, in order to downplay or even deny any cause of crisis.

In short, this “explosion of Late Antiquity” is starting to raise some eyebrows.<sup>53</sup> A novelty of great importance for historiography surely is represented by the fact that the last two volumes of the new edition of the Cambridge Ancient History include the fourth to the seventh century that were part of Medieval History in the preceding edition. And equally indicative are the two “polyphonic” volumes devoted to Late Antiquity in the *Storia di Roma* published by Einaudi.<sup>54</sup> Contrary to Averil Cameron’s fears, the subject of Late Antiquity has not dissolved; rather, it seems framed according to fairly traditional parameters in the collective volumes mentioned above.

It is true, perhaps, that we are “trying to do too much,” as Averil Cameron also suggested in the introductory lecture to the 1997 meeting at Spoleto. Certainly, we have learned much from this fruitful period of studies. But it may be that the war season has ended, and we now need to put some order in the conquered territories. It is not by chance that scholars as different as Andrea Carandini, Aldo Schiavone, and, from a purely philological perspective, Wolfgang Liebeschuetz have felt the pressing need to recover the concept of “crisis” between the Roman Empire and the Early Middle Ages.<sup>55</sup> Even a medievalist such as Chris Wickham, usually numbered among the supporters of continuity, has felt the need to underscore the reasons in favor of discontinuity and decline when confronted with Jean Durliat’s theory about taxation.<sup>56</sup> And it is not by chance that the name of Rostovtzeff is the most often cited, as if to underscore the necessity to bring the discussion back to social dynamics and to the great themes of economic, institutional, demographic,

<sup>52</sup> The fundamental work is A. Carandini, *La nascita di Roma. Dei, lari, eroi e uomini all'alba di una civiltà* (Turin, 1997).

<sup>53</sup> The expression “explosion of the late antique” (“esplosione di tardoantico”) indicates, first and foremost, the chronological expansion of the period, but also can be used to underscore the extraordinary flourishing of studies (often of “total” history) on Late Antiquity.

<sup>54</sup> Note 3 above.

<sup>55</sup> Carandini, “Ultima civiltà”; A. Schiavone, *La storia spezzata* (Rome/Bari, 1996); J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Decline and Fall of the Roman City* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001). Especially important is his “Uses and Abuses” (followed by Av. Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins, M. Whittow, L. Lavan, *Responses*).

<sup>56</sup> Chris Wickham, “La chute de Rome n’aura pas lieu,” *Le Moyen Âge* 99 (1993), 107–126, and Idem, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

and even political history in order to study the late antique individual and his/her demons within this context.

Periodization itself has made a comeback, and language plays a primary role. Within an extended and expanded Late Antiquity, German scholars draw a distinction between “Frühspätantike” and “Spätere Spätantike,” notwithstanding the ill-sounding locution. And the problem should not be dismissed as secondary, given the fact that it was the focus of one of the last contributions of a scholar as rigorous as Alfred Heuss.<sup>57</sup>

The title given by Liebeschuetz to a collection of his essays (“Decline and Fall of the Roman City”) is deliberately reminiscent of Gibbon’s work, and in another essay Liebeschuetz has expressed disapproval of the fact that nowadays the concept of “decline” is to be avoided as “slightly immoral.”<sup>58</sup> I am not sure that Andrea Giardina intended to “put the genie back into the bottle”—a bottle with the image of Constantine on the front and that of Justinian on the back—as Garth Fowden suggested,<sup>59</sup> but surely all scholars who see themselves as part of the Italian historiographical tradition—whether Marxist or not—will agree with him that a historical period is defined necessarily by its specific political, economic, and institutional structures,<sup>60</sup> and those structures end up losing their distinctive character when considered exclusively from the point of view of continuity.

The genie in fact already has been put back into its bottle in the thirteenth and fourteenth volumes of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, which consider the Lombard invasion as the end of the ancient world, at least as far as the west is concerned.<sup>61</sup> Grappling with the idea of decline through discussion of that “paradigm of any decline” as represented by the decline of the Roman Empire remains a peculiarity of European culture, as well as some important British historians.<sup>62</sup> It is difficult to say to what extent this propensity is the

<sup>57</sup> Heuss, “Antike und Spätantike.”

<sup>58</sup> Liebeschuetz, *Uses and Abuses*; in the same volume, Av. Cameron states that the concept of decline is too emotional to be used with profit.

<sup>59</sup> Garth Fowden, “Elefantiasi del tardoantico?,” *JRA* 15 (2002) 681, 681–686. Fowden, a historian of religious ideas, is one of the most fervent supporters of a long “Late Antiquity”: see Idem, *From Empire to Commonwealth: The Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993).

<sup>60</sup> Not surprisingly, the anonymous reader of my contribution for volume 13 of *The Cambridge Ancient History* found fault with my “traditional” analysis of social relationships that was inspired supposedly by Marxist historiography (although I think that one simply could talk of a “historicist” approach) and judged it outdated. To be sure, the periodization I followed in *Il mondo tardoantico. Antologia delle fonti* (Rome, 2000) was “traditional.”

<sup>61</sup> Av. Cameron, “‘Long’ Late Antiquity,” 165 n.2, rightly reasserts the arbitrary character of any chronological divisions of the material in series of this kind: vol. 13 of *The Cambridge Ancient History* covers the period 337–425 and vol. 14 the years 425–600.

<sup>62</sup> See Av. Cameron’s clear remarks, “‘Long’ Late Antiquity,” 190–191, n.6.

consequence of an increasing awareness of current decline—a decline that is not clearly defined, but is nonetheless an argument of debate in many countries in western Europe. But, once again, at the beginning of the third millennium, the prevalent impression is that the most mature historiography cannot be understood in isolation from its experience of contemporary history.<sup>63</sup>

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(Translated from Italian by Cristiana Sogno.)

<sup>63</sup> The first one-third of this contribution was previously published in Italian as “La caduta di Roma all’inizio del III millennio,” in Paolo Desideri, Mauro Moggi, Mario Pani, eds., *Antidoron. Studi in onore di Barbara Scardigli Forster* (Pisa: ETS, 2007), 267–80.

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