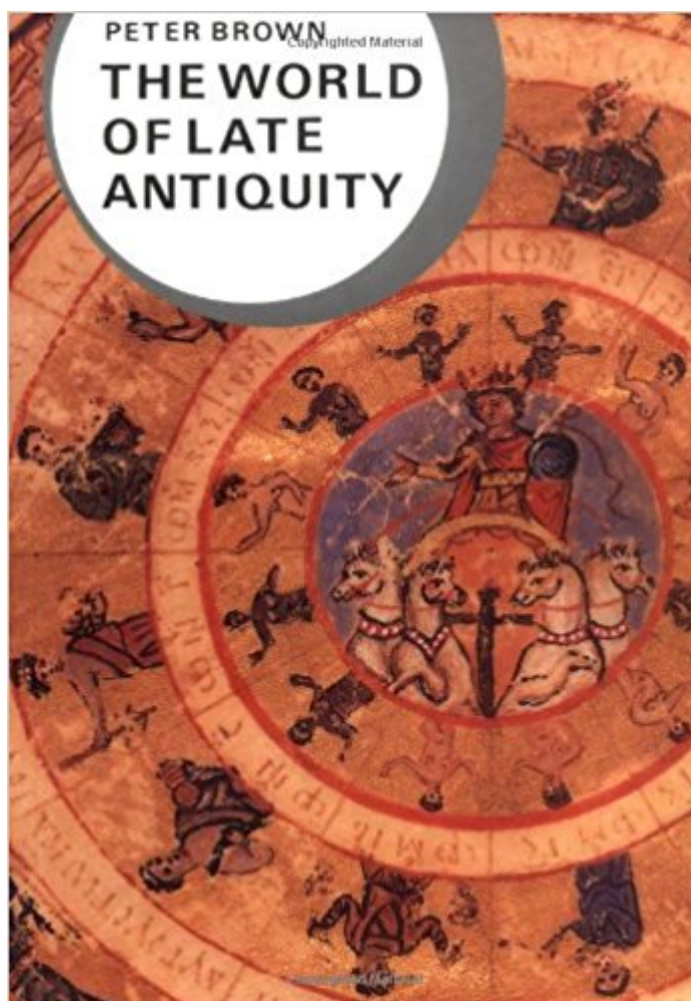


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The World Of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750 (Library Of World Civilization)



Synopsis

This remarkable study in social and cultural change explains how and why the Late Antique world, between c. 150 and c. 750 A.D., came to differ from "Classical civilization." These centuries, as the author demonstrates, were the era in which the most deeply rooted of ancient institutions disappeared for all time. By 476 the Roman empire had vanished from western Europe; by 655 the Persian empire had vanished from the Near East. Mr. Brown, Professor of History at Princeton University, examines these changes and men's reactions to them, but his account shows that the period was also one of outstanding new beginnings and defines the far-reaching impact both of Christianity on Europe and of Islam on the Near East. The result is a lucid answer to a crucial question in world history; how the exceptionally homogeneous Mediterranean world of c. 200 A.D. became divided into the three mutually estranged societies of the Middle Ages: Catholic Western Europe, Byzantium, and Islam. We still live with the results of these contrasts.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Peter Brown (Ph.D. Oxford University) is the Rollins Professor of History at Princeton University. He previously taught at London University and the University of California, Berkeley. He has written on the rise of Christianity and the end of the Roman empire. His works include: *Augustine of Hippo* (1967); *The World of Late Antiquity* (1972); *The Cult of the Saints* (1981); *Body and Society* (1988), *The Rise of Western Christendom* (1995 and 2002); *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (2002). He is presently working on issues of wealth and poverty in the late Roman and early medieval Christian world.

This is one of those history books that defines an era, setting a standard that is either accepted or opposed by all who follow. Because it is one of the turning points that most fascinates me, this book was a particular pleasure, at once an over-arching synthesis yet accurate in its evocation of detail. The book begins at a turning point in Roman history. After the golden age of the Empire, Roman political institutions entered a period of deadly instability: with its army outmoded, its politicians incapable of long-term compromise, and outsiders pressing on the borders, it appeared that Rome was doomed. However, with the reorganization of the society and army associated with Diocletian (244-311 CE), a little-known political genius, the state was once again mobilized on a scale even grander than it had known, with a more evenly distributed system of taxation and the opening to talent outside the traditional aristocracy (for both the Army and a massive new bureaucracy). Diocletian's reforms offered a reprieve to Greco-Roman culture, in existence for nearly 1,000 years. This ancient tradition was based on an established literature and rhetoric, the mastery of which were the basic requirements of any public career; acquiring it was costly and time-consuming, which for the most part only the aristocracy could afford. Religiously, it was polytheistic, allowing flexibility for local cults that served the notables of each region and city to celebrate their uniqueness and reinforce their power. However, by opening the army and government to talent outside this tradition, Diocletian weakened this culture. Moreover, as the centralized bureaucratic state dominated Roman institutions with the cult of the emperor, the local polytheistic Gods were losing their clout and Romans began to explore monotheistic alternatives. Once the borders began to be threatened again, this search accelerated under extreme crisis. The appeal of the various monotheisms - and there were very many that Brown describes - was that they offered new ways of seeing the world that were more accessible to the common man than the rarified and largely unobtainable classical tradition. Suddenly, anyone could ask philosophical questions within new communities, of which Christianity was only one of the most prominent. With Constantine's conversion, in this scheme, Christianity slowly moved to the fore. When the western portion of the Empire fell to barbarian invasion, the surviving local notables made their peace with the new masters (who were almost all members of various Christian sects). This provided a stability that nurtured the growing churches, allowing landowners and others to enter the clergy and thereby retain much of their influence. Meanwhile, in the east, Byzantium kept much of the Roman tradition alive, in its Christian version; up until the autocracy of Justinian, it was a bureaucratic state run on relatively rational lines. In Brown's telling, the long war between Byzantium and Sassanian Persia weakened both states, offering an opening to the Arabs with their new Islamic monotheism. By the time the Umayyads had conquered Northern Africa and most of the Levant, the classical era was

decisively ended and the Medieval Ages had begun. This summary cannot do justice to the subtlety of Brown's argument, which examines social and cultural change rather than explains the fall of Rome. He encapsulates this period to near perfection, but if the reader is unfamiliar with the period at the undergraduate level, the book could be pretty rough going. Brown is also a wonderfully elegant writer, his language a great pleasure. Recommended with enthusiasm.

Brown is the original scholar of Late Antiquity, having been the one to coin the term. The era is roughly the third and eighth centuries, covering Rome's crises of the third century, subsequent reforms under Diocletian, collapse and transformation of the West, up through Charlemagne and the Muslim Conquests. Much of this time is commonly known by the largely incorrect and misleading term of the Dark Ages. Brown challenges the Gibbon's view of a decline the sudden collapse of the Roman Empire due to Decadence and Barbarian conquests as the end of a Golden era and the beginning of a dark one. On the contrary, Brown explains that if anything Rome underwent a gradual transformation and that the time period saw a continuation of many Roman cultural traditions, but transformed into newer versions along with also being a period of great innovation and progress. Brown's masterwork completely change how European history was viewed and gave rise to new area of studies. It is also entertaining and a enjoyable read. It should be considered required reading for any scholar or indeed anyone with even a passing interest in early European history.

This "essay" as Peter Brown calls it, introduces a man to late antiquity the period of time between about 155 A.D and the medieval period brought about by Islamic conquest in the 7th and 8th centuries. This highly tumultuous time is too often ignored, and yet these times have had great impact on who we are today, the languages we speak, and the beliefs we take for granted. Peter Brown thoroughly disabuses a person's ignorance of this period with this essay in which art becomes a footnote. Not since reading *How Should We Then Live?* (L'Abri 50th Anniversary Edition): *The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* have I seen a book so thoroughly look at art and its interplay with culture. Seriously, this book should be read by art lovers just for the treatment it gives to the development of western art, and its meaning! However, that does bring us to an unfortunate aspect of this Norton Print on demand book. There are no color pictures in this book. As others have said it is like a bad xerox copy. I would give it a four for this, if it weren't for the fact that the essay itself is so intriguing, and one can look the pictures up online if one wants to see more detailed versions of it. It is an essay, and it has not footnotes or endnotes. The Bibliography in

the back is undoubtedly out of date yet again as it was revised in 1987 the last time. Hard to believe that was almost thirty years ago. However, the book is still a great introduction to the period, his explanations of the art make up for a lack of footnotes, and verify what he writes in a very unique way. I am not yet sure if the illustrations, though, are more or less distracting than footnotes might have been. In any case they were enjoyable.

Peter Brown is one of the leading scholars of the Byzantine era, and this book fully reflects the depth and richness of his scholarship. It is a relatively short work but provides ample reminder, if such were needed, of the extraordinary influence of the Eastern Roman Empire during the period of transition from the classical era to what followed. Brown shows convincingly that there was no abrupt break with classical civilization after the first sack of Rome and the decline of the empire in the West, but rather a gradual transition in the West and a continuation of the tradition, with greater Greek than Latin inspiration, in the East. He also reminds us that at least a few great emperors of the East (Justinian, Theodosius) succeeded for a time in reasserting imperial authority in the West and in northern Africa. Not light reading, but worth the effort.

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