



Pushing Boundaries

A Long Late Antiquity

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This editorial introduction explains the rationale for this journal and its place in the current research landscape of late antique studies. While this field has “exploded”, different specialisms and disciplines continue to approach the period through their own specific lenses. We contend that further conversations across these boundaries and over a long late antiquity will be key to advancing the field and offers this journal as a home for these interdisciplinary conversations.

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Introduction

Few fields have exploded like Late Antiquity. What was once a historical nadir, a definitive break with the culture of the ancient world, is now seen as a dynamic period of innovation and transformation.¹ On the one hand, Alois

1. For reflections on this historiographical reorientation, see e.g., James 2008; Ando 2008; Rebenich 2009.

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Riegl's *Spätantike*, originally denoting a stylistic transition in the visual arts, has swelled to become a nexus of research in History, the History of Art, Religious Studies, Archaeology, and more.² On the other, this rapid expansion has highlighted the interconnectivity of the late antique past along vectors that transcend traditional (Western) scholarly boundaries. From Christian missionaries preaching at the Tang court of Chang'an from the seventh century onwards,³ to migrations of people and plague across the steppe,⁴ to Kosmas Indikopleustes' discussions of commercial links between Persia, Ethiopia, and Sri Lanka,⁵ to an eighth-century Central Asian prince adopting the title *Frum Kesar*, "Caesar of Rome,"⁶ Late Antiquity has never been bigger.

At the same time, integrating this ever-growing scope into a coherent picture has proven challenging. The surge of research, publications, novel approaches, and new data has meant attaining a bird's-eye view of the field *in toto* is now essentially impossible—a sure sign of its ongoing success. Yet this growth has not been met with universal approval. Andrea Giardina, for example, complained that Late Antiquity's *esplosione* centered a narrow spectrum of disciplinary priorities—principally those of social, cultural, and religious history.⁷ Consequently, the place of what was once the period's primary historical axis, the Western Roman Empire's fifth-century dissolution, has become ambiguous, representing to some merely an ephemeral ripple in the great currents of the historical *longue durée*.⁸ Although debate has long moved on from drawing strict oppositions between "continuity" and "catastrophe," old battle lines are still liable to resurface, particularly between practitioners of different disciplinary assumptions and/or distinct institutional milieux.⁹

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2. Riegl 1901. For Riegl's intellectual context and influence, see Elsner 2002; Elsner 2021.
 3. Lieu and Thompson 2021; Nicolini-Zani 2022; Balmont 2025.
 4. Meier 2019; Gnechchi-Ruscone et al. 2022; Grenet and Harper 2025. For a careful review of the evidence for the origins of the Justinianic plague, see Preiser-Kapeller et al. 2025.
 5. Kominko 2022.
 6. Grenet 2022.
 7. Giardina 1999. For a response, see Cameron 2003.
 8. Highlighted already thirty years ago by Bowersock 1996; see also, Giardina 1999, 172–7. Consider e.g., Cameron 2012, 40: "The fifth century saw one of the most famous non-events in history – the so-called 'fall of the Roman empire in the west.'" For the *longue durée* of Mediterranean history, see e.g., Horden and Purcell 2000. Scheidel 2019 provocatively argues that the "Fall of Rome" was, in fact, a positive turning point.
 9. For differences between textual-empirical and anthropological schools in

Most recently, scholarship has turned towards integrating scientific analyses—particularly from the fields of epidemiology, climate science, and genetics—in order to augment their understanding of the past, yet this has simultaneously provoked methodological critique and reflection.¹⁰ In general, Late Antiquity's underlying assumptions as a paradigm, as well as its relationship to present-day concerns, remain undertheorized.¹¹

It is in this context that we present *Essays in Long Late Antiquity*. Taking an actively expansive view of the field, *ELLA* seeks to push its boundaries—to further catalyze its “explosion,” one might say—through wide-ranging, interdisciplinary investigations of the dynamic centuries of the first millennium CE. In what follows, we seek to locate the journal and its objectives within what we suggest is a unique moment of historiographical flux.

Liminality and Connection: Geographic, Temporal, and Institutional Perspectives

From its inception, Late Antiquity has been a liminal period, one located at the crux of an Antiquity-that-was and a medieval world to come. Though Peter Brown, to name only the most vociferous of its proponents, has urged that it be considered a discrete historical era in its own right, the perception of Late Antiquity as transitional—defined less by its own characteristics than by those of the periods bracketing it—has persisted.¹² One finds traces of this paradigm not only in the traditional centrality of the Roman Mediterranean's “Decline” (and putative Fall), but also in revisionist conceptions of “Transformation.” Both imply movement from one state to another. More recently, the characterization of the post-classical world as one of crisis (whether political, climatic, or

archaeology, see e.g., Lavan 2003. A disconnect between “continuist” historical paradigms and the picture provided by archaeological evidence (particularly ceramics) ultimately underlies the intervention of e.g., Ward-Perkins 2003, 87–183.

10. See e.g., Harper 2017; Preiser-Kapeller 2021a; 2021b. For commentary and critique, see e.g., Sessa 2019; Meier 2020b; Kay et al. 2025; Newfield and Sessa 2025; White 2025; Green 2026.
11. Liebeschuetz 2001 and Ward-Perkins 2003 attempted to relate the field's focus on continuity to the politics of “multiculturalism.” Cf. the important contribution of Gillett 2017. Neil and Allen 2011 connect late antique and modern attitudes towards refugees and other displaced groups. Generally, consider e.g., Ando 2008; Kaldellis 2015; Humphries 2017.
12. Notably e.g., Brown 1971. For Brown's intellectual context and contribution, see Wood 2016.

epidemiological) echoes the idea that Late Antiquity was an era on the edge. As much as it is true that no historical period can be analysed as an unchanging, homeostatic system, this approach to the past has placed too much emphasis on *transition* being itself characteristic of late antique societies.

This impasse derives in part from a dissonance between traditional periodizations founded in political history, on the one hand, and the interdisciplinary character of the field as now practised, on the other. Nicholas Matheou has provocatively argued that the “analytical common sense” of Byzantine Studies is fundamentally “statist”; that is to say, its assumed subject is the Eastern Roman Empire itself, its fortunes and its failures.¹³ A similar point could be made about Late Antiquity, at least for Europe and the Mediterranean of the Roman Empire, though similar paradigms also emerge when looking towards Sasanian Persia, early medieval China, or even periods of consolidation and disintegration on the Central Asian steppe.¹⁴ The work taking place under this umbrella, however, has increasingly concentrated less on the fates of empires and more on the various apparatuses that made their societies work—on the domestic, local, and regional arrangements of individuals and groups and their capacities for adaptation, resilience, and independent action. This development, then, that is so often described as a turn from “Decline and Fall” towards “Continuity and Transformation” could just as easily be reckoned as one from an institutional history of the State towards a variegated tapestry of interwoven communal histories, whether political, civic, religious, ethnic, or linguistic in nature.

In this light, temporal boundaries calibrated to events, imperial reigns, or the tenure of dynasties look increasingly malapropos. Garth Fowden’s proposal of the first millennium CE as a discrete temporal category from the perspective of religious history might sound conservative, yet it addresses exactly this issue, namely, the need for categories that meaningfully and concisely group comparable phenomena, yet remain flexible enough to account for local difference.¹⁵ From a similar perspective, and as indicated in our title, *ELLA* adopts an avowedly “long” definition of the period, stretching from roughly 100 to around 800 CE. Our goal is not to precisely categorize what *is* or *is not* characteristic of Late Antiquity between hard and fast boundaries. Rather, it is to embrace the broad temporal span in which an array of networked societies

13. Matheou 2023, esp. 76–7.

14. Di Cosmo and Maas 2018. For recent attempts to problematize both the teleological narrative of “China” and its imperial nature: Felt 2017; Chittick 2020; Yang 2024.

15. Fowden 2013.

emerged across Afro-Eurasia—abruptly, in some places, less so in others—that were connected directly, through the mobility of people, objects, and ideas, and also indirectly, in their shared experiences of supraregional and global phenomena.

Should we speak of a “Global Late Antiquity,” then? Certainly, the dramatic societal transformations witnessed during these centuries—from the effects of climatological change to cultural responses to pandemic disease to political instability and proselytizing religions—did not respect geographic boundaries and generated comparable, if not identical, responses across various social and cultural contexts. Despite its good intentions, however, critics have argued that the Global Turn, especially in Medieval Studies, has imposed European and Christian chronological constructs on societies with their own distinct trajectories, yoking them to frameworks of historical time that would be unrecognizable to subjects living within them.¹⁶ Similarly, continuous expansion risks a kind of oppressive relativism: the construction of comparative models that flatten the dissimilar historical and cultural circumstances from which local phenomena emerge.

To be sure, questions of temporal and geographic division go hand in hand: to create divisions in time is implicitly to create divisions in space.¹⁷ Notably, Fowden’s argument for the first millennium as a coherent historical period is partly in response to the methodological naiveté of scrutinizing the emergence of Islam within a Christian- and European-centric temporal and, implicitly, geographic schema.¹⁸ Unlike the Global Middle Ages, however, Late Antiquity’s disciplinary gaze has not been trained primarily on Europe *per se*, but rather the Mediterranean Basin. For this reason, it more readily resists the charge of Eurocentrism, though this focus nonetheless instantiates its own disciplinary borders. As Guy Halsall has perceptively argued, “it remains puzzling why it should be more acceptable or thought less odd to talk of late antique Axum or late antique Persia than about late antique Ireland or Denmark.”¹⁹

Crucial though these theoretical questions might be, they have not as yet

16. For Late Antiquity, see e.g., Preiser-Kapeller 2018; Guidetti and Meinecke 2020. On the inherent eurocentrism of (Western) historical method, see e.g., Chakrabarty 2000. For critique of the Global Turn in Medieval Studies, see e.g., Berend 2023; De Souza 2024; Schine 2024; Wang 2026.

17. E.g., Nelson 1997.

18. Fowden 2013, esp. 1–15. On incorporating the rise of Islam into the scope of Late Antiquity, see e.g., Hoyland 2012; Meier 2020a.

19. Halsall 2009, 409–10.

been the subjects of sustained critique. One possibility is to conceptualize Late Antiquity as an era of “small worlds” that were connected by the people, objects, and ideas that crossed their geographic and temporal boundaries.²⁰ Without a focus rooted in the local and particular, our image of the past loses resolution: it becomes difficult to grasp and, perhaps, inadvertently falls victim to totalizing Grand Narratives that squeeze Late Antiquity between neighboring periodizations, thereby cementing its “transitional” nature. At the same time, this period saw major shifts across the Afro-Eurasian sphere, from the rise of religions variously in alliance and in conflict with state power; to the spread of revolutionary technologies such as paper or stirrups; to new ideologies of visual display. We thus encourage contributions that consider the wider late antique world from a comparative or interconnected perspective alongside focused, specialist investigations. We intend this as an invitation for closer dialogue across disciplinary borders and for the recognition of parallel developments—an addition to, rather than a replacement for, local definitions of historical time. We note here that similar invitations are being extended by scholars in other fields.²¹ It is our hope that *ELLA* will be a forum in which they might be answered.

It is a testament to Late Antiquity’s vitality that it is uncommonly receptive to interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approaches. At the time of writing, the training to undertake research in the field might embrace (depending on the national scholarly context) everything from “traditional” methodological toolsets such as palaeography, stylistic analysis, or philology to postmodern critical theories, digital humanistic and computational approaches, and scientific analyses as noted above. The very “inbetweenness” of Late Antiquity has, in other words, made it a nexus of disciplinary and methodological innovation. Yet this expansiveness comes at a cost. At a time when the study of premodernity in general is devalued and dismissed within broader institutional and national frameworks, the scholar of Late Antiquity may play the role of the “Swiss army knife” of the premodern curriculum, straddling multiple methodological, disciplinary, and temporal areas. At the same time, not being easily categorizable creates obstacles within the bureaucratized, “impact”-oriented attitude of the neoliberal university—secure positions dedicated to late antique studies remain few.

20. We echo here the concept of “micro-Christendoms” expounded in Brown 2003. Useful also are the reflections of Hermans 2020. For an attempt to embrace both “micro” and “macro” historical scales, see Ghobrial 2019.

21. Yang 2024.

There is no easy solution to these challenges, yet we nonetheless wish to close on a word of hope. In the foregoing, it should be clear that the expanses of the late antique world, in every sense, have grown immeasurably and continue to do so. For some, this may serve as a sign of theoretical incoherence. We take a different view. While the strictures of contemporary higher education seek to create atomization, to place us within disciplinary or thematic siloes, to study Late Antiquity is to invest our specialized expertise in a shared project, to collaborate across imposed boundaries. It is our hope that that solidarity can serve as the foundation for lasting change.

The Inaugural Issue

The contributions to our inaugural issue exemplify this approach. Focusing particularly on questions of temporality and its reification as historical periodization, all shine new light on inherited paradigms and so demonstrate the utility of a “long” Late Antiquity for their respective fields.

Luis Josué Salés brings postcolonial theories to bear on the historiography of late antique philosophy. Making the provocative argument that “Neoplatonism” was a historiographical invention of the nineteenth century, he uncovers the foundational role played by essentialized binary distinctions—between “Aristotelianism” and “Platonism,” “East” and “West”—in the scholarly conceptualization of this philosophical movement. Contrasting modern Western European approaches to the Neoplatonist scholars Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximos the Confessor with largely neglected nineteenth-century Russian scholarship, he opens a decolonial path for rethinking Late Antiquity beyond inherited hierarchies and categories.

In a similar fashion, Michael Höckelmann examines the concept of *zhonggu* (中古, “Middle Antiquity”) in Chinese historiography. Stretching from the early third to the tenth or eleventh centuries CE, *zhonggu* would seem to represent a rare instance of overlap with Western ideas of historical categorization. As Höckelmann shows, however, the evolution of the term’s meaning reveals the active work performed by paradigms of decline, continuity, and tradition in the past and the present alike. His article thus encourages us to investigate how such “regimes of historicity” developed over time in our own fields, and thus to ask deeper questions beyond the applicability of Western paradigms to non-Western contexts.

From another angle, Alessia Zubani’s paper scrutinizes the nature and

extent of continuities between Sasanian and early Islamic institutions and ideas of political authority. Centering on an emblematic case, the now-lost Sasanian royal chronicle known in Arabic as the *Kitāb ṣuwar mulūk Banī Sāsān* (“Book of the Portraits of the Sasanian Kings”), Zubani reconstructs aspects of its content to offer insights into Sasanian manuscript culture and visual history. Adopting a comparative and interconnected approach to Late Antiquity, her contribution both highlights characteristics shared with the visual language of the neighboring Roman Empire and draws attention to the active reinterpretation of Sasanian imperial memory in the early Islamic centuries.

Michael Eber offers the first English translation of the oldest Latin *vita* of Marinus (Marina) the Monk, one of a number of late antique saints who were assigned female at birth, but lived as men in male monasteries. While the Greek version of this text is well studied, its movements in and through the Mediterranean Basin have not received sustained attention. The Latin *vita* was, judging by the number of extant manuscripts, the most popular version, yet has not to date been available in any modern language. Eber’s contribution thus aims to jump-start new research into the Mediterranean *mouvance* of *monachoparthenia*, the hagiographic motif underlying the story of Marinus.

Finally, Ellen Muehlberger takes three innovative recent books in Early Christian Studies as a springboard to meditate on the tools at our disposal to reconstruct the past. Each work shares an investment in recovering the “lived” beliefs and practices of Christians beyond the “thin census,” in her words, represented in the textual record. As she notes, such work has access to no additional evidence from an empirical standpoint, but rather represents a reorientation towards the sources themselves—the questions we ask, the methods we apply, the lessons we draw. Although there is no way to definitively bridge the chasm between textual representation and the subjectivities of historical actors, Muehlberger suggests that such methods are not inherently faulty. Rather, they approximate, they draw us closer to an understanding—an experience that, as she notes, we share with those early Christians who sought to understand their own history.

Essays in Long Late Antiquity: A Mission Statement

ELLA sets out to:

- break down traditional borders between fields defined by geography, time, and methodology
- provide a forum for interdisciplinary exchange and debate
- draw comparative connections between the established spatio-temporal foci of “Late Antiquity” and other historical, geographic, and cultural contexts
- create a publishing venue for the essential (yet critically undervalued) work of textual editing and translation, especially of shorter, overlooked sources

In sum, the mission of *Essays in Long Late Antiquity* is to publish research essays and translations concerning the period between approximately 100 and 800 CE and the broad geographical region spanning Europe, northern and eastern Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and Asia. We encourage bold contributions, and especially those that reflect upon the state of the field and its geographic, temporal, and methodological definition. To that end, collaborative and co-authored essays are especially welcome. We are active supporters of Open Access publishing and the free exchange of knowledge to all. Ultimately, our guiding principle is to look at Late Antiquity not merely as a transitional period, but as a world of its own. We look forward to discovering where the field might turn next.

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