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A COMPANION TO LATE ANTIQUE LITERATURE

EDITED BY SCOTT McGILL
AND EDWARD J. WATTS

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A COMPANION TO LATE ANTIQUE LITERATURE

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PART ONE

LATE ANTIQUE LITERATURE BY LANGUAGE AND TRADITION

Introduction

Scott McGill and Edward J. Watts

This volume presents a set of essays highlighting the richness and creativity of late antique literature. Our description of that literature will surprise far fewer readers today than it would have throughout most of the twentieth century. A consensus existed then, especially in the Anglophone world, that late antique texts were generally derivative, uninteresting, and reflective of decline across the Mediterranean. Indeed, with a few exceptions (notably Augustine), late antique literature was largely dismissed if acknowledged at all.

The declinist approach that reigned in the twentieth century and relegated late antiquity to the dusk before the Dark Ages has not yet disappeared. But it has widely given way to responses that shed the old prejudices – however inscribed they remain in school curricula – and recognize the quality, interest, and value of late antique literature.

Late antiquity was an extremely productive time in literary history. A great amount of Greek and Latin texts in prose and verse survives from the mid-third to the early seventh century, the period upon which this book centers. Alongside that work, moreover, stand large corpora written in Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Pahlavi, Arabic, and a host of other regional languages. Taken together, the surviving literature from these centuries exceeds the sum total of surviving texts from the Mediterranean during the preceding millennium.

Late antique literature was also profoundly innovative. It was marked by modes of productive reception in which authors updated and transformed what came before them and by the emergence of new subject matter, new genres, new settings for literary production, new textual functions, and new

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reading practices (see Herzog 1989, p. 33). As a result, late antiquity has much to tell us about the dynamics of literary history: how the cultural past creates, and is created by, what succeeds it, and how traditions are endlessly in movement as they flow through the manifold channels of reception. What is more, late antique literature is an indispensable witness to a period of seismic cultural changes. The corpus of texts, with its huge size and variety, sheds much light on the late antique world across vast swaths of territory and across linguistic, religious, and class lines.

The chapters comprising this volume give an overview of the literature of late antiquity, while also providing a selective account of its reception history. The book centers on Greek and Latin texts; these were, of course, predominant in the literary culture of the late Roman Empire, which is the primary focus of this *Companion*. But the volume also expands to include literature in other languages. This reflects the multicultural and polyglot world of late antiquity, in which the literature of Greek- and Latin-speaking Romans was situated among and interacted with the texts of different kingdoms and peoples. The period was a time when a broad range of Greek and Latin texts crossed political, linguistic, and cultural borderlands into the emerging and vibrant vernacular literatures of the Mediterranean, the Caucasus Mountains, the Iranian Plateau, and the Arabian Peninsula. To get a more developed sense of the literature of the period, it is therefore crucial to break free of the Greek/Latin binary and to encompass a broader range of languages and traditions (Humphries 2017).[1] The creative energy of late antiquity can only be appreciated when the extent of its reverberations are recognized.

Late antique literature demands, too, that we be flexible with the binary classical/Christian. Late antiquity represented one of the great transitional eras in literary history. Its authors, especially but not exclusively those working in Greek and Latin, were trained to appreciate classical forms and rhetoric, and many developed great familiarity with the works of classical authors. This training deeply influenced both their conception of literature and the sorts of projects they undertook. While established classical genres and literary models often framed the work that late antique authors undertook, these men and women were not at all stuck in or constricted by the past. Instead, late antique authors recast the classical inheritance to create texts that reflected contemporary tastes and needs and that fit with new cultural and historical developments. Foremost among those developments was the rise of Christianity into a culturally and politically dominant force. The literature that accompanies the emergence of Christianity as a privileged religion in the Roman world represents a significant late antique innovation. Christian authors remade established genres and specific textual models from the classical past, but they also departed from that past by responding to a

separate authoritative tradition comprising the Scriptures and other Christian writings while producing texts in styles and for settings and uses with no precedent in classical culture. Christian literature thus lies both within and outside of the classical tradition; organizations of knowledge and of cultural history in which the classics stand on one side and Christianity on the other are entirely inadequate to deal with that body of material (Elsner and Hernández Lobato 2017, pp. 3–6).

The chronological limits of the late antique world cannot be precisely defined. We have chosen to center the volume on the period between the middle of the third century and the roughly first third of the seventh century. The boundaries we have set require both some explanation and some flexibility. The mid-third century represents a significant point of demarcation between the literature of the high Roman Empire and the literature that begins to emerge in the fourth century. While it is true that some authors like Plotinus, Cyprian, and Bardaisan stand astride this divide, most of the major developments we want to consider in Greek and Latin as well as in the various vernacular literatures take distinctive turns in the later third and early fourth centuries. To give just three examples, these years saw the flowering of Syriac poetry, the emergence of several new forms of Christian literature, and an expansion in the texts treated and approaches utilized by exegetical commentators.

It is also clear that many of these literary developments reach a natural end point in the first decades of the seventh century. This is the case with Greek poetry, for instance, whose last late antique representative is George of Pisidia, and is essentially true of Latin poetry, despite the history of Visigothic verse. There are also distinct and dramatic breaks in the Greek medical, philosophical, and astrological commentary traditions. Likewise, after Theophylact Simocatta and Isidore of Seville in the first third of the seventh century, there will be no major authors of Greek or Latin historiography active for more than a century. Admittedly, the date has less meaning in some areas, including Syriac and Coptic literature, and little significance at all in Persia. Still, the dramatic decrease in surviving Greek and Latin literature written after ca. 630 means that most of the essays in this volume do not understand late antiquity to extend beyond the first half of the seventh century.

While our chronological boundaries are relatively well demarcated, our definition of literature is a capacious one. The modern restriction of the word to creative works, particularly poetry, drama, and prose fiction, is alien to antiquity (Goldhill 1999; Vessey 2012, 2015), and we follow convention in the field of classical studies in applying the term to an array of texts that today would be classified differently. "Literature" is in our formulation a broad rubric, and it covers a wide range of textual means, both written and

oral, through which individuals in late antiquity represented, organized, and understood the world around them. We recognize that the line between the literary and the nonliterary/subliterary is sometimes uncertain. We acknowledge, too, some restrictions in our approach: For the most part in this book, the category "literature" comprises only texts to which authors and textual communities assign value that separates them from the purely functional and the disposable. This includes school exercises, which, even when they were throwaway student efforts, belonged to literate culture and were designed to train the young to attain some level of rhetorical skill. Those exercises can also be placed within the bounds of literature for the same reason that texts like technical treatises and laws can be: They defy attempts to classify them as nonliterary because they possess features, notably linguistic self-consciousness, representational strategies, rhetorical characteristics, and intertextual ties to authoritative textual models, associated with the literary. Intertextuality is, in general, another important marker of literature in our formulation. Literary works operate within or against (at times multiple) discursive systems with different histories; they belong to and participate in diachronic fields of marked textuality, including when they update and remake that inheritance. Paraliterary and metaliterary compositions – e.g. commentaries, epitomes, and handbooks, all of which are characteristic of late antiquity – are not separate from the literary, moreover, but are extensions of it.

A broad examination of the textual resources that were transmitted and transmissible in late antiquity provides an expansive view of literary production in the period. The essays gathered in the volume examine the forms, histories, characteristics, audiences, and functions of many different kinds of late antique literature. In the process, contributors demonstrate how modern analytic techniques developed primarily for a narrower band of literary forms can be applied productively to a wider group of texts.

The volume is organized into three sections. In Part One, the chapters consider the processes through which the literary outline of the ancient world was expanded as more authors began working in a broader group of languages. The chapters in this section present the diverse linguistic literary histories of the period, and they connect literature to currents in political, religious, and cultural history throughout the later Roman, Sasanian, and Arab worlds. Collectively, the bodies of literature reveal varied and sustained sets of literary projects through which authors over vast territories used literature to deal with topics and to articulate worldviews within and, at times, across the cultures of the late antique world.

The second and longest section of the volume considers a wide range of late antique literature. It is organized around the concept of a literary form. The concept includes genres, which are fluid and dynamic in late antiquity:

An important characteristic of late antique literature is the way in which authors pushed against and beyond inherited generic conventions and develop new variations on traditional genres (including by combining them) or new genres altogether. But "form," as we are using it, is a more elastic term than "genre." By "form" we mean a body of texts linked, sometimes in a broad sense, by formal properties, subject matter, method, tone, or function (or some combination of these). The texts might lie within or across genres, or they might lie outside of the traditional, recognized generic matrix. The category "form" provides a balance of coherence and flexibility, and it enables the section to cover a very wide amount of material. A clear sense of the variety and vitality of late antique literature emerges from the chapters. Contributors analyze the sets of characteristics that define the different literary forms and the ways that the forms reveal a distinctive late antique culture of literary experimentation and growth.

The final section of the volume considers the reception of late antique literature. It is, of course, impossible to deal exhaustively with the subject. The chapters instead examine particular epochs, as well as major individuals, in the reception history of late antiquity. Contributors consider the transmission of late antique texts, the interpretation of them in the respective ages, and the resonance they enjoyed. The chapters show how the literature of the period now known as late antiquity was made and remade over the course of its long and varied history. There are many late antiquities that emerge during its reception; with the past as our guide, we can expect that there will be many more in generations to come.

We are now at a time of reengagement, which has brought much late antique literature back from the brink of scholarly extinction and has led to considerable reevaluation of late antique texts and literary culture. This volume is an attempt to further those developments. Our strong wish is that the book will help scholars and students to understand late antique literature on its own terms. This, in turn, will enable them not only to know better the world of late antiquity but also to appreciate more deeply ways in which literary creativity can be expressed.

NOTE

1. Circumstances beyond the editors' control made a chapter on Jewish literature impossible. On that literature, see Fergus Millar, Eyal Ben-Eliyahu, and Yehuda Cohn, eds. (2013), *Handbook of Jewish Literature from Late Antiquity, 135–700 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

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CHAPTER ONE

Greek

Scott Fitzgerald Johnson

Greek in late antiquity is not easily categorized. It was a language of empire, a language of philosophy and theology, a marker of identity, a language of routine daily life and commerce, and, above all, a language with symbolic power for both the literate and illiterate in the language. Greek in late antiquity was a heritage language due the literary legacy which characterized it in the period, but it was also, in linguistics terms, a "prestige" language, a status signaled by the innumerable translations made out of Greek into all the early Christian languages, such as Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, Arabic, and Old Church Slavonic. As such, Greek held an innate value for speakers of other languages, who, over the course of late antiquity, developed their own claim on the language and, in certain cases, their own distinctive brands of Greek literacy and pedagogy. Thus, Greek in late antiquity took on a sociocultural role distinct from the literature written in it. This chapter investigates that sociocultural role and draws attention to the symbolic value of the language as a marker of identity in the period.

This sociocultural role was never divorced from the literature written in Greek both before and during late antiquity. The relationship between the two categories was perpetuated by the premium placed on Greek in the Roman educational system, especially in the eastern Mediterranean (Marrou 1956; Cribiore 1999, 2001; Too 2001; Van Hoof and Van Nuffelen 2015; Kaster 1983, 1988; Watts 2006). In other words, Greek was valued for the intellectual and literary riches to which it offered its readers access, in a similar manner to how it is still taught in university Classics departments today. Education allowed for advancement in society and participation in a much

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larger intellectual and social world than merely the local, where the quotidian language was often not Greek. The rhetorical training embedded in late Roman education was especially valuable, as in earlier centuries, for gaining public office and engaging literate society (Brown 1992; Quiroga Puertas 2013; Webb 2009).

The many Greek letter collections from the period, moreover, attest to Greek – paralleled, of course, by Latin – as a medium of intellectual communication across the late Roman Mediterranean (Neil and Allen 2015; Gillett 2012). Late antiquity is justly famous as a period of self-reflective correspondence, and many letter collections seem to have been drawn up by the authors themselves or at least by their immediate circles. This was the case for the Christian monastic founder Pachomius (Choat 2015) and the bishop Isidore of Pelusium (Evieux 1997), for example, as much as it was for the pagan orator Libanius (Bradbury 2004). Libanius's collection reveals not just a skilled letter writer but also how his voluminous correspondence coincided with the real-world movement of Greek students and teachers throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Libanius's letters thus reflect the evolution of Roman patronage networks within the late antique school system. One letter (*Ep.* 1098), to the Jewish patriarch Gamaliel in Jerusalem, concerns Gamaliel's son, who studied Greek rhetoric with Libanius at Antioch after having studied with Libanius's former pupil Argeios at Caesarea or Berytus (Beirut) (Stemberger 2014, p. 32).

At the same time, levels of Greek literacy varied considerably, and the language was often used as a blunt instrument at the barest functional level (Bagnall 2011). The key difference between the late antique role of Greek and our modern pedagogy of "classical Greek" is that these low-level exchanges in late antiquity were very much still Greek-in-use, even if they are formulaic and unsophisticated by comparison to the literary Greek we teach and prize today. This has certainly always been the case in the history of Greek – it was and remains a living language, after all – but for late antiquity we are privileged to have a marvelous record of these low-level exchanges, a record that does not survive for, say, classical Athens in the fifth century BCE (Horrocks 2010). Mountains of papyri from late Roman and early Byzantine Egypt attest voluminously to quotidian Greek.

The Egyptian papyri similarly attest to the near constant interaction between Greek and Coptic (Bagnall 2011, pp. 75–111). As its own medium of literature and exchange, Coptic developed alongside and in relation to Greek. Sociolinguistics of late antique Egypt is a vibrant field, and none of its researchers today would allow for one of the languages, on a cultural level, to be divorced from the other (Cribiore 2007; Papaconstantinou 2007, 2008, 2010; Bagnall 2009; MacCoull 1988, 2013). To put it differently,

"the Greek of Egypt" is not a real category for cultural study; instead, we should think about Greek in terms of what roles it was used for in tandem with the roles Coptic played at the same time (and these roles shifted over the course of late antiquity). This axiom is true for all of the many varied linguistic contexts in which Greek was taught and used (Johnson 2015a), yet it does not preclude the delineation of characteristic features of Greek in a given locale, such as Egypt (Gignac 1976; Fournet 1999).

Because Greek was the medium of theological exchange, it held a special value for the highest-stakes debates in late antiquity. There was a venerable legacy of Greek among Christians since, as everyone knew in the period, the New Testament was written in Greek and the first churches were all Greek-speaking (Porter and Pitts 2013a, 2013b; Karrer and Vries 2013). The same was largely true for the Old Testament, since the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible made by Jews in the Hellenistic period, was the dominant version of the Old Testament in earliest Christianity (Aitken and Paget 2014; Rajak 2009). All the indigenous early Christian communities translated the Bible into their own languages early in their history; such translations were, indeed, markers of their own Christian identity. But it was never forgotten that these were translations, and knowledge of the original Greek of the Bible, where available, was prized.

There has been a vibrant discussion in recent scholarship over why exactly Greek became the language of theological debate. Was it because Greek was venerated as the language of the Bible? Or was it a practical question, because Greek was the medium of power and law (the *Rechtssprache*) in the eastern Mediterranean under Rome (Millar 2006b; cf. Johnson 2015a, esp. pp. 8–17)? The technical terminology of Christian doctrine that developed over the course of the seven ecumenical councils, from Nicaea I (325) to Nicaea II (787), and in the numerous theological treatises emerging around and fueling these councils was hard won and could not be relinquished easily. But was institutional inertia the main driving force? I return to this question below, though suffice it to say that the relationship between this Greek technical terminology and Greek as the language of empire is complex.

Of course, theologians were not the first to coin technical terms and formulae in Greek. Philosophy had a long history of working out its logical and argumentative apparatus in Greek. Systematization of philosophy – Neoplatonism, in particular, but also Aristotelianism – was a trend characteristic of late antiquity across many genres and in several centers of intellectual endeavor. (See the "Ancient Commentators on Aristotle" series, ed. Richard Sorabji [http://www.ancientcommentators.org.uk]; Sorabji 2004; Gerson 2010; Falcon 2016.) The overlap of philosophical, legal, and rhetorical schools in the East – in Alexandria (Watts 2006), Gaza (Johnson 2015a,

pp. 31–35; Downey 1958; Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky 2004, 2006), Berytus (Hall 2004), Athens (Cameron 1969; Watts 2006), and Constantinople (Wilson 1996, pp. 28–60) – reinforced the above-mentioned value of Greek for social advancement through education while at the same time encouraging the attachment of value to the charisma of specific philosophical teachers and schools at these centers. Porphyry's important output, not least the editing and publication of Plotinus's *Enneads*, provided an indispensable educational tool in Greek, which was subsequently translated into Latin, Syriac, Arabic, and other languages (Johnson 2013; Magny 2014; Brock 1988, 1989b). Greek became, over the course of late antiquity, a type of holy language for Greek philosophy because of the canonical works expressed in it, such as Plotinus, Aristotle, and, of course, Plato himself, especially his later "cosmological" dialogues (the *Timaeus* above all) (Baltussen 2008; Tarrant 2007–2013). Translations by scholars like Calcidius (fourth century) into Latin and Jacob of Edessa (seventh century) into Syriac became standard in their own milieux but never existed wholly without reference to Greek (Magee 2016; Romeny 2008). Indeed, the eagerness with which Syriac Christian scholars repeatedly went back to the Greek originals for their Syriac and Arabic translations of philosophical and medical treatises shows the continued notional value of the language, even after the texts were readily available in other (albeit less accurate) translations (Brock 1983, 1991, esp. 2004). In the Latin West this direct access to Greek for philosophical work seems to have been lost after John Scotus Eriugena and even well before him in some quarters (Jeauneau 1987, pp. 85–132; Herren and Brown 1988).

Bringing these two strands together, I would emphasize that Greek was also the medium of disputation between Christians and Neoplatonic philosophers. This was already in evidence at the time of Origen's *Contra Celsum* (248 CE), but in the sixth century, in the context of the vibrant commentary movement on Plato and Aristotle, many different thinkers engaged one another at a highly technical level in the medium of Greek. The literary debates between Simplicius, John Philoponos, and Cosmas Indicopleustes in Justinianic Alexandria are perhaps a high water mark of this type of engagement (Baltussen 2008; Anastos 1946, 1953; Pearson 1999; MacCoull 2006). It is clear that formal public debates also occurred regularly, sometimes modeled on the literary debates but also providing inspiration for literature that created imagined disputations from whole cloth (Cameron 2014). Connected to this technical literature are the many magical/theurgic (Burnett 1996; Noegel, Walker, and Wheeler 2003; Lewy 1978), numerological (Kalvesmaki 2013), and astrological (Hegedus 2007; Magdalino 2006) treatises produced by both Christians and Neoplatonists