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The Early Modern Invention of Late Antique Rome

by Roberto Alciati in Review, Book Notes



Nicola Denzey Lewis. *The Early Modern Invention of Late Antique Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

At first glance, the book under discussion appears to be a survey of the ways modern amateurs, historians, and archaeologists have shaped—author Nicola Denzey Lewis would perhaps say ‘fabricated’—the history of the city of Rome in late antiquity. In fact, the book is much more than that. *The Early Modern Invention of Late Antique Rome* is a lesson on method and the urgent need for scholars to reflect on the assumptions and practices animating their research.

In any field of scholarship, and especially in the study of religion, it is a truism to say that the understanding of historical processes in depth can only be undertaken seriously by paying attention to the empirical record. But there is another aspect that must not be overlooked: scholars also must try to reveal the abstractions behind their concrete objects of study. That some form of abstract classification is necessary if a discipline is not to lose itself in a mass of unmanageable detail is beyond doubt; in other words, we should not disregard this necessary dialectic of the abstract and the concrete. Empirical studies of history have been written, which despite their appearance as simple historical narratives, help us theorize *how* we write history. This book is a prime example of a comprehensive attempt to integrate the ‘concrete’ and the ‘abstract’ through “a microhistorical approach” (p.13) that focuses on select figures – both ancient and modern – and key sites, such as St. Peter’s Basilica, the catacombs, and martyr shrines.

The abstract, theoretical level of historical research is admittedly more complicated than the concrete one. It involves understanding the ideologies of historical agents, as well as the ideologies of historians. Denzey Lewis’ analysis focuses mainly on this second aspect, that is, the assumptions and categories scholars bring to the practice of historiography. Despite the book’s title, *The Early Modern Invention of Late Antique Rome* cannot be considered a book about late antiquity exclusively. It is, in fact, a study of how “the conceptual acts of mapping the city as a network of holy martyr sites [and other “sacred” space] ... create a sacred landscape [that] was a feature of Counter-Reformation piety.” (p.12). In the “Introduction” (pp.19-23), Denzey Lewis places her work in dialogue with scholarly conversations of late antique hagiography. Three threads then hold the chapters together: the notion of sacred space, the two storytellers who helped “invent” late antique Rome, and the relationship between physical space and late antique sources about them. Denzey Lewis charts a challenging course, but she proceeds carefully, step by step, through her exploration of late antique Rome.

The first thread is the notion of sacred space. The existence of martyrial sites and venerated graves in the late antique Mediterranean is beyond dispute, but it is anachronistic to think of these sites as part of a coherent map, at once mental and real.

The creation of a network of sacred spaces in Rome is a product of the modern age, but the raw material (that is, the physical space itself) derives from antiquity. The effort to organize Rome's topography dates to the nineteenth century, with interest in interpreting the saints' shrines spatially first appears. The book's third chapter introduces the element that holds space and time together: the human remains themselves. Here the author argues that unlike fourth century Christians living elsewhere, Roman Christians refrained from fetishizing the corpse as a precious object. The issue is certainly relevant and shows how important it is to pinpoint material and corporeal turns for the study of ancient religions; however, the situation might be more complex than Denzey Lewis notes. She argues that the worship of bodily relics is absent in Rome (citing the sixth-century writings of Gregory the Great), but there are several separate issues that might account for this situation: the fetishization of dead bodies, the rejection of relics *per se*, or even a general discomfort with dismemberment of the body. In any case, she is certainly correct that in Counter-Reformation Rome "the real corporealization of the relics" and the "sense of the holy within bits of human corpse" are pervasive (p.160). This no doubt affected how these Catholic thinkers imagined antique Roman space.

Chapter Four provides a fascinating illustration of the interwoven and layered process of creating historical narratives. This chapter, devoted to Peter's bones could certainly expand into its own book. As Denzey Lewis explains, no evidence of Peter's burial remains, and we may never be able to find them. But many still fervently argue that the literal body of the martyred saint lies under St. Peter's Basilica. The invention of this sacred space first appears during the tenure of Pope Damasus (366-384), who was interested in 'another Peter,' the Peter who founded of the papacy. For him, Peter as a martyr and as the founder of Christianity in Rome was no longer enough.

Until the fourth century, Denzey Lewis suggests that "the automatic connections we so often make between corporeal relics and the establishment of sacred space" (p.301) are not as apparent as we think. Tombs and catacombs were not 'sacred space' in late antiquity, although they were deliberately presented as such from the Counter-Reformation until the present. The story of Peter's tomb would thus be proof of what Denzey Lewis suggests earlier in the book: sacred spaces were identified on the basis of stories, not vice versa. In her words: "*first story, then place*" (p. 88). This confirms, she notes, scholar of religion Jonathan Z's Smith's famous *dictum*: "people are not placed; they bring place into being" (p.81).

But stories need somebody to tell them. What makes Denzey Lewis' book unique is how she centers both the storytellers *and* their stories. There are the main actors on stage,

two “impresarios” (p.219), who both contributed to making antique Rome a network of sacred space and a holy city. Pope Damasus is the first, for he lived in Rome and served as its bishop between 366 and 384 CE. The second key figure is Giovanni Battista De Rossi (1822-1894), the Italian archaeologist who inaugurated Christian archaeology some fifteen centuries later and who is universally regarded as the discoverer of Christian catacombs. As historians, we are often inclined to consider Damasus our object of study, while we would treat De Rossi as ‘one of us’. In this book, however, both are examined as objects worthy of study. De Rossi is treated first since he is responsible for the modern invention of late antique Rome, specifically, the idea that Rome is the extraordinary and unique example of a Christian city with intentional holy space. De Rossi’s efforts serve as the culmination of a process begun by Damasus (only partially successful) to transform burial spaces into holy places and the catacombs we all know. Through this work, Damasus sought to consolidate his power as a church leader. While Denzey acknowledges that Damasus was surely interested in inculcating “specific ‘memories’ at specific Christian sites” (p. 93), he was not “the first urban planner of late antique Rome” (p.92), as scholarly literature would lead one to believe.

In the nineteenth century, De Rossi established the direct relationship between burial sites and written sources. And his work was as ideologically driven as Damasus’s: both had an interest in organizing the topography of Rome into a network of sacred space. As Denzey Lewis shows, sacred history and sacred archaeology were united by de Rossi toward the same goal: “De Rossi and his fellow Catholics stood to gain considerable social capital by creating a collective, commemorative ritual that developed and perpetuated a new, Christian social memory” (p.219). In other words, De Rossi’s work is certainly important in terms of archaeology, but here Denzey Lewis makes an important distinction: De Rossi is the one who established the connection between physical spaces in Rome and the sacred spaces discussed in late antique writings. As she demonstrates, these links naturalized a sacred history, rendering it beyond scrutiny.

In the opening chapter of the book, Denzey Lewis poses the provocative question: how did Rome become holy? The answer, as we see by the end of this book, lies mainly in the logic behind the compilation of the sources rather than in the sources *per se*. In other words, historians need to study not just the historical data, but also, the imposition of different classifications on that data—especially those that have been unquestioned for centuries. Classifications are never objective, and Denzey Lewis illuminates how analysis must consider how such classifications came to be in the first place. As we read in the Introduction, “the genesis of *Roma Sacra* is revealed not in the ancient sources themselves, but in the way in which we are led to see it, refracted, as it is, through the lens of those who very much understood what was meant by ‘sacred Rome’” (p.29).

Denzey Lewis' book brought to my mind the words of Brent Nongbri discussing the invention of Mesopotamian religion in the nineteenth century. "It was immaterial," Nongbri writes, "whether or not the primary source evidence that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would show that such a category was native to ancient Mesopotamian civilisations. Mesopotamian as a concept had been created, and it was only a matter of time until data would be provided to fill the blanks" [1]. According to Denzey Lewis, something similar is happening in Rome, which means that ancient data are always misleading because they are fabricated, or in other words, selected and assembled by historians. If this process of selection and privileging of certain sources now seems quite clear regarding texts, this book shows us that even the fragments of stone and marble on which inscriptions and epigraphs are recorded can undergo a very significant process of manipulation by historians and archaeologists. Therefore, if we want to understand more about such material evidence as the catacombs and the cult of relics, one ought to pause and consider the late antique sources themselves and devote ourselves to studying the ideological work of more recent thinkers such as Pomponio Leto, Filippo Neri, Cesare Baronio, Pope Gregory XIII, Pope Pius IX, and Giovanni Battista De Rossi. They are just as important as the ancient material remains for understanding more about the process of the invention of late antique Rome.

[1] Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 144.

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