

contexts. By contrast the remaining essays comprise specific studies (Rapp, Stoyanov, Barta and Piovaneli) or more general surveys (Boccaccini, Pettipiece, Witakowski and Miltenova) of non-Armenian antique and medieval apocalyptic traditions, with the latter group addressing Jewish, Manichaean, Syriac and Bulgarian material. While these pieces afford all manner of insights in their respective fields, they also attest to some of the methodological and linguistic challenges presented by comparative analysis. It is left to the reader to discern the connections and discrepancies between Armenian apocalypica and these other traditions; only Hultgård's important contribution addresses these issues directly.

The volume is enhanced by DiTommaso's masterly concluding essay, in which he reflects on taxonomic and conceptual challenges within the field of apocalypticism as a whole before proposing five features of the medieval apocalyptic tradition. DiTommaso offers an impressive outline of the Armenian apocalyptic tradition as it is currently configured – even today our knowledge remains very incomplete – before arguing for the specific role of medieval apocalypticism in the formation and development of ethno-national identities. As a way of thinking about the function of apocalyptic writings, this shows great potential.

This volume represents a very significant advance in the study of the Armenian apocalyptic tradition. Aside from giving an impression of the wealth of material available, it also presents new ways of approaching the texts, individually and collectively. At the same time, one can expect that this collection will promote a wider awareness of the profile of the Armenian apocalyptic tradition and its potential for future collaborative cross-cultural research.

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*The ransom of the soul. Afterlife and wealth in early Western Christianity.* By Peter Brown.

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The grave-stone in the shape of a teddy-bear stands not far from the carved angel which now tilts gently through the subsidence of long years. Just as a modern graveyard reveals the changing attitudes and beliefs of its occupants and their families, so the tombs and writings of the early Christians in the Latin West can be examined for changes in their religious imagination, their understanding of death and life beyond the grave. These changes are what Peter Brown elegantly sets out in his latest book. He charts shifting beliefs about the afterlife shared, and sometimes disputed, by Christians between the mid-second and the mid-seventh century, to explore what in the wider society explains these developments.

An introduction usefully highlights the distance separating Tertullian's thought-world from the beliefs revealed by Julian of Toledo in his *Prognosticon futuri saeculi* of 688. For Tertullian, only the martyrs entered directly into the presence of God, while other deceased souls quietly awaited the Last Judgement. For Julian, each soul had its own *post-mortem* 'trajectory ... charged with individual drama and interest', and those destined for heaven moved towards their goal at different speeds (pp. 14–15). Chapter i explores the role of almsgiving for early Christians in prayer for the dead. A development is observed between the second and third

centuries, on the one hand, when almsgiving enables strong bonds between rich and poor, the living and the dead; and, on the other hand, the period from the fourth century onwards, when almsgiving becomes less expressive of ‘solidarity’ and more ‘a purely expiatory action that involved little or no bonding with the poor themselves’ (p. 44). This development is seen to be driven in part by the increasing numbers of the very rich and very poor who entered the churches from the fourth century. At around the same time, epitaphs increasingly came to reflect Platonic ideas about the immediate ascent of the disembodied soul to heaven. Chapters ii and iii focus mainly on Roman North African during Augustine’s lifetime. They detail the bishop’s theological caution in responding to elite Christians who wished to be buried next to the martyrs, and his belief in the need for regular almsgiving to expiate daily sins, like the waterwheel continually turning to irrigate the fields. Peter Brown sees such ‘patterns of religious giving in Africa’ as threatened by Pelagian writings which advocated the complete renunciation of wealth (p. 93).

The second half of the book concerns Gaul. Chapter iv considers the southern Gaul of Salvian and his readers who were influenced by the monasticism at Lérins. Peter Brown analyses the ‘emergence, in fifth-century Gaul, of a powerful “discourse” of penance’ where ‘a drastic notion of public penance was used as a template for an equally drastic notion of conversion’ (p. 126). This discourse legitimated the authority of bishops like Eutropius at Orange, who were seen to have broken from their past. In chapter v the spotlight moves to Gregory of Tours in the late sixth century, when miracles at martyrs’ tombs reveal the power of God and the imminence of his coming Judgement. Prayer for the dead was effected through gifts of land to the Church for the feeding of the poor. As a result, those who appropriated church lands could be condemned as ‘murderers of the poor’, while the notion of the poor as ‘victims, identified with Christ, served to sacralise ecclesiastical property’ (p. 172). The epilogue turns finally to Columbanus, the extreme asceticism of his monasteries, and their impact on a new elite in the Frankish courts of northern Gaul. Death-bed visions and other near-death experiences revealed to the living the price of each unrepented sin and the pressing need to pray for the departed.

As is to be expected from this historian and master storyteller, specific details, images and episodes are used throughout the book to conjure up lost thought-worlds, and to illuminate the connections between different areas of life and thought. As is also to be expected, recent scholarship is ably deployed to explode received ideas. Thus, where scholars once thought of the ‘later Merovingians ... as no more than unreconstructed thugs’, we are now to recognise courtiers ‘influenced ... by monastic practices’ who forged an ‘ideology of consensual rule’ as though ‘the Frankish kingdom itself were a great monastery’ (pp. 194–5). In conclusion, Peter Brown offers a new criterion by which to mark the end of late antiquity: ‘When the bond between the living and the dead, constantly cemented by the rituals of the church, became a cosmos of its own ... around the year 650 AD ... the ancient world truly died in Western Europe’ (p. 211). This is an excellent book which will be read with pleasure by the general reader, student and specialist alike. All should find something to challenge old ideas and further new insights.

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