issue of which the author herself is aware. At the very end of the book, she attempts to fill this gap through the imaginative reconstruction of a lower- to middling-class house in Egypt with its associated material culture and sentimental meanings. In this way, she offers a final counterpart to the elite material culture that predominates in her study, in order to prove that sentimental values linked with objects transcended status and socio-economic borders. Bringing together people of different backgrounds in her object-based approach to the late antique world, the author thus shows again the close bond between persons and objects, which connects the reader of this book in a recognisable way with the people of the past.

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JAMES R. HARRISON and L. L. WELBORN (EDS), *THE FIRST URBAN CHURCHES. 1, METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS* (Writings from the Greco-Roman world supplement series 7). Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015. Pp. xiii + 345; illus. ISBN 9781628371031. £32.50.

JAMES R. HARRISON and L. L. WELBORN (EDS), *THE FIRST URBAN CHURCHES. 2, ROMAN CORINTH* (Writings from the Greco-Roman world supplement series 8). Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016. Pp. xvi + 353. ISBN 9780884141136. £46.50.

JAMES R. HARRISON and L. L. WELBORN (EDS), *THE FIRST URBAN CHURCHES. 3, EPHESUS* (Writings from the Greco-Roman world supplement series 9). Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018. Pp. xix + 361. ISBN 9780884142362. £39.99.

JAMES R. HARRISON and L. L. WELBORN (EDS), *THE FIRST URBAN CHURCHES. 4, ROMAN PHILIPPI* (Writings from the Greco-Roman world supplement series 13). Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018. Pp. xix + 403. ISBN 9780884143369. £41.99.

The origin story to Wayne Meeks' book, *The First Urban Christians* (1983), one of the twentieth century's foundational works of ancient studies, includes a fascinating admission of an early professional failure. Amid the pleasant surroundings of Dartmouth, New Hampshire, in front of his first undergraduate audience, frustrations mounted with his lectures. 'Certain students let me know', Meeks says, 'that the splendid constructions of modern New Testament scholarship, which I was eager to impart after seven years of professional and graduate schools, were not really intelligible to them' (ix). Fifty-five years on from that difficult New England winter, Meeks is now emeritus professor at Yale; *The First Urban Christians* enjoys life in a second edition; and his most recognisable contribution has been translated into six languages.

Social subjects were not, at the time, a natural focus for the New Testament classroom, and the young Meeks had taken a considerable risk by focusing his energy on developing a method to teach them. Casting aside the specialised language of analysis which scholars call 'exegesis' (and which remains a staple of theology), Meeks adopted an imaginative, rigorously evidentiary approach that would become the hallmark of his work. While others promoted the New Testament as essential reading in world literature, he zeroed in on how the early Christians had formed their earliest communities, which they called the *ekklesia*, or 'church'. Where believers of different denominations turned to the text for a deeper understanding of their faith, Meeks sought to reveal patterns of early Christian daily life.

Theologians had been forceful in cautioning him away from these endeavours. 'Sociological interpretations of religious phenomena are inevitably reductionist', they warned. But Meeks, whose first publication as a seminary student had been a book on Genesis and Abraham's decision to leave Ur by setting out for the land of Canaan, suspected that a little less reverence could pay real dividends for the field. Uncovering Christianity's complicated origins meant potentially reframing larger questions, such as how the religion had come to dominate Rome. 'Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly', the people of Babel say in Genesis, before they are stricken with the curse of never arriving at any shared understanding. It is Babel, one suspects, which is precisely what the young historian of Christianity wanted to leave behind.There have been litanies of spin-offs in the decades since: Todd D. Still and David

G. Horrell's *After the First Urban Christians* (2009), Steve Walton, Paul R. Trebilco and David W. J. Gill's *The Urban World and the First Christians* (2017), Thomas A. Robinson's *Who Were the First Christians?* (2017). The continued relevance of the book is explained by both its hard-won accessibility and the persuasiveness of Meeks' thesis, which goes something like this. The forces responsible for kickstarting the history of Christianity originated in the jumbled realities of city life. Notwithstanding the brutal facts of Jesus's death and his followers' belief in his resurrection, aspects of Hellenistic and Roman business, law, morality, politics, language and family dynamics constituted the essential ingredients by which Christianity grew into a sustainable movement.

Over the years a few chips and cracks have opened up. A government official named Erastus, seen in a Corinthian inscription, is probably not the man mentioned in one of Paul's letters, as Meeks surmised. There have also been attempts to imagine the early house church along the lines of a lower-class tenement gathering — a shift in emphasis towards the poor, driven by those scholars who took umbrage at the ease with which Meeks worked the upwardly mobile into the history of the church. Meeks' argument, however, had never depended on documenting with statistical precision the economic or demographic profile of any single Christian cell. As Meeks knew, an ancient house evoked 'certain implications … for the internal structure' of the organisation and for Christianity's 'larger relationship to society', precisely because these meeting places had been 'inserted into or superimposed upon … existing networks of relationships' (76). That even the most counter-cultural groups integrate into society, usually as an act of self-preservation, was not a radical premise, even in the early 1980s. Anthropologist Victor Turner had observed as much, in his seminal study *The Ritual Process* (1969), when he argued that underground movements will make themselves known — which is to say, leave discernible traces behind — through their 'juxtaposition to, or hybridization with' aspects of the dominant social structure (127).

The First Urban Christians never claimed, as Meeks' more parochial detractors would later charge, that early Christianity was exclusively urban, that there were no countryside communities, no poor, no marginalised. Even in antiquity, the most hard-headed pagan knew that these 'Messiah worshipers', or whatever they called themselves, could be anywhere: in the apartment upstairs or the villa next door. But the crux of Meeks' contribution was that, without Christianity's pivot to an urban milieu — a decision by Christians to wrestle with both the dangers and the enchantments of cosmopolitan life, as contained in their most potent pre-modern form, the ancient city — Jesus' followers might well have vanished, their beliefs buried somewhere in the Judaean hills to be puzzled together later, like scraps from Qumran. It was their effort at 'hybridization', as Meeks implied, which helped the first generation of Christians achieve something truly miraculous. It guaranteed there would be a second.

The thirty-eight contributions which James R. Harrison and L. L. Welborn have curated for their new series *The First Urban Churches* bring an eclectic set of interests to the editors' ambitious undertaking. 'New Testament researchers have failed to bring the full range of documentary and archaeological evidence into sympathetic dialogue with the upper-class literary evidence and the writings of the New Testament', H. charges in the opening volume (9). Meeks' work 'posed the right questions', but it 'failed to generate [a] detailed city-by-city approach' (2), he says, before launching into a quick review of scholarship on the *polis* and a series of long-form sketches on the archaeological histories of cities with Pauline connections.

However, where Meeks had synthesised a wide range of evidence to make specifically 'trans-local' claims, this series can sometimes struggle to see beyond chapter and verse. F. J. Long's contributions – '"The God of This Age" (2 Cor 4:4) and Paul's Empire-Resisting Gospel at Corinth', in volume 2, and the essay co-authored with R. K. Giffin, '"Every Knee Bowed": Jesus Christ as Reigning Lord over "the Heavenly, the Earthly, and the Subterranean Gods" (Philippians 2:10)' in volume 4 — underscore the early church's ideological conflicts with Rome. So does S. Witetschek's 'From Zeus or by Endoios? Acts 19:35 as a Peculiar Assessment of the Ephesian Artemis', in volume 3, as well as K. Ehrensperger's 'Between *Polis*, *Oikos*, and *Ekklesia*: The Challenge of Negotiating the Spirit World (1 Cor 12:1–11)', in volume 2.

How to integrate Greek and Roman evidence into any study of the New Testament remains a tricky craft. The challenge, as Heidi Wendt put it in her paradigmatic study *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire* (2016), is to achieve a kind of 'methodological inversion that arrives at rather than begins from the Christian evidence' (39). The better contributions in this series adopt that model. Classicists and ancient historians would do well not to ignore these interdisciplinary papers.

M. Peppard's essay on rhetorical texts (volume 2, 'Brother against Brother: *Controversiae* about Inheritance Disputes and 1 Corinthians 6:1–11'), which focuses on the concept of '*gratia*', reflects on how Roman models influenced Paul's perceptions of that word and shaded its meaning in his correspondence. R. S. Ascough's study of the process by which Rome extended citizenship to its colonies, and the groups who lobbied the authorities specifically for it, suggests how Paul might have been negotiating similar benefits for the Philippians (volume 4, 'Did the Philippian Christ Group *Know* It Was a "Missionary" Society?') — at least before he was arrested.

Other contributions ask art historical and archaeological questions focused on a newly discovered gladiator relief found near Laodicea; on coins struck to honour cities where emperor worship marked a point of local pride; and on details behind the engineering of the canal at Corinth. Multilingualism comes up. So do papyri in Egypt and mystery cults in Ephesos. Many chapters come with a posture at exhaustibility and a mind-numbing level of detail. Summarising overwhelms the substance of more than argument. It would have been helpful, as well, if the co-editor W., the author of two chapters on economic questions (volume 2, 'Inequality in Roman Corinth: Evidence from Diverse Sources Evaluated by a Neo-Ricardian Model'; volume 1, 'The Polis and the Poor: Reconstructing Social Relations from Different Genres of Evidence'), had engaged more explicitly with Meeks' thesis. Without it, W.'s arguments and those of similar essays, including D. K. Pettegrew's 'The Changing Rural Horizons of Corinth's First Urban Churches' (volume 2) and J. M. Ogereau's 'Methodological Considerations in Using Epigraphic Evidence to Determine the Socioeconomic Context of the Early Christians' (volume 1), while interesting for the glimpses of economic diversity they offer, leave readers to wonder how any of this material fundamentally changes the study of the process by which early Christians and their leadership survived. Devoid of any conclusions, all four volumes end with the abruptness of a hastily concluded seminar, as if, to everyone's surprise, time had simply run out to say anything more.

H. and W. have done a commendable job by encouraging further research into the social-historical aspects of early Christianity, a point that deserves particular emphasis, given that the earnest approach which Meeks popularised has rather fallen out of fashion. Works are still produced today on archaeology and the New Testament, but thick layers of cultural theory are usually heaped on top of the evidence.

Cultural criticism — an anti-imperial reading of this Christian text, an open-ended rumination on that overbearing monument — has become the coin of the realm for scholars hoping for a quick fix to keep important topics, like poverty, women's agency and social justice, in the public consciousness. The slick packaging of social-historical reconstructions, however, otherwise called 'narrative', is now decidedly recherché. To hear C. Concannon tell it (volume 2, 'Negotiating Multiple Modes of Religion and Identity in Roman Corinth'), the new generation prefers to take its histories 'redescribed'.

That is not to say that the rewards of social-historical inquiry have been exhausted. In her essay on Philippians (volume 4, 'Rooted in Heaven and Resident in Philippi, but No *Ekklēsia*?'), K. Ehrensperger rightly wonders why Paul never used the word 'church' in his surviving letter to the community. Could it have been to avoid surveillance of his correspondence while he was in prison? Did he not want to ally himself with individuals he knew were marginalised in their town? Several explanations are considered, before a not entirely convincing solution is proposed. The exercise in the study of a puzzling absence — a sharp move in an occasionally lethargic series — would have delighted a scholar of Meeks' and Turner's own generation, the sociologist Erving Goffman. Questions about how, when, where and to whom an individual might safely reveal 'discrediting' information fascinated him. 'To display or not to display, to tell or not to tell, to let on or not to let on': this, Goffman wrote in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), was the everyday monologue of individuals who lived in the 'shadow' of other norms and values and whose overlooked experiences called out for study (41–2, 129).

Why is there no Christian art from the period of the first churches? Why is there no Christian architecture to be found in any of these cities prior to the fourth century? Why have no Christian objects, like jewellery, furniture, or dish ware, been unearthed from the same time span? And what does this absence say about the choices Christians made, in cities or elsewhere, to find their place in the empire as New Testament writings were being endorsed, rejected and codified? Contributors to this on-going series have ignored these lines of inquiry so far, even as they might have the power to reanimate the very enterprise which the books hoped to rekindle. But whatever

awaits the field of early Christian studies is going to depend on whether there are scholars to be found, like Meeks, who are no longer content to preach to the choir.

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CHRIS DOYLE, *HONORIUS. THE FIGHT FOR THE ROMAN WEST AD 395–423*. London: Routledge, 2019. Pp. xx + 205; illus., maps. ISBN 9781138190887. £120.00.

Late Antiquity is filled with emperors whose reigns were brief (months to a few years). Few last ten years, fewer still twenty or more. Officially, Honorius reigned for twenty-eight years, yet his reputation is poor, and his relative longevity is usually attributed to those around him. In this short book, part of Routledge's 'Roman Imperial Biographies' series, Chris Doyle provides a short and easy-to-read overview of the life and times of this notorious late Roman emperor. The book is comprised of nine chapters, which proceed chronologically, and it includes a number of illustrations and useful charts. D.'s purpose is to resurrect the much-maligned emperor; his portrait of Honorius is sympathetic and the man he describes is complex, though not everyone will be convinced by D.'s arguments.

The first chapter surveys the sources and looks at Honorius' later reputation from the early modern era to the recent past. Procopius is identified as the source of much of the later critiques, and Photius too comes up for criticism for his take on Eunapius, to give just two examples. But D. also discusses the legal, the numismatic and all kinds of other evidence. The second chapter turns to the background: the legal rights of the people in late Roman society, the conflict between Christians and pagans and the seemingly interminable wars with barbarians. D. also describes the rise of the Theodosian dynasty, of which Honorius was a part. In ch. 3, we finally meet Honorius himself, and we read about the role of Stilicho and Honorius' mother Flaccilla. Most of the focus, however, is on Theodosius I. Honorius' education and upbringing are the subject of chapter four, though D. also touches on the machinations of Argobastes and Arcadius. Ch. 5 discusses the conflict with Gildo in North Africa. Ch. 6 turns to Honorius and marriage. Among other things, D. notes how marriage worked differently depending on one's social class, the distinct lack of images of Maria and Thermantia, and the growing disconnect between Honorius and Stilicho. Ch. 7 focuses on the troubles Rome had on the Rhine, in Gaul, and in Britain, and the growing need for more troops. D. also discusses the end of Stilicho and Honorius' struggles to keep the soldiers under control, which was particularly marked at Ticinum. Honorius' famed pet chickens, who are connected to the siege of Rome, also make an appearance. Ch. 8, which opens with an interesting anecdote on Ronald Reagan's reference to Honorius in a speech, starts with the emperor's alleged cancelling of the games, which D. discounts because of the lack of legal evidence. D. notes Honorius' favouritism towards Catholicism and, from 409, his increasing intolerance concerning everyone else. In ch. 8, D. expands upon his discussion of Honorius' relationship with the church and also investigates his building programme. Ch. 9, the final chapter, returns to the importance of family to Honorius, his attempts at reconciliation between East and West and his complicated relationship with Galla Placidia.

D. devotes considerable space to propaganda, which is perhaps unsurprising, given the considerable focus on coinage. Indeed, D.'s engagement with the numismatic evidence is commendable, and the abundance of images makes it easier to follow the various arguments. There are also some thought-provoking discussions, such as D.'s comments on John Lydus' claims that Theodosius had legally banned his sons from participating personally in war because he did not trust their abilities. To top it all off, D. writes well, which helps his case, and makes the volume more appealing to a reader approaching the material with little background. Some descriptions are particularly evocative, such as his account of the death of Eudoxia and the spectacular finds from Maria's tomb.

On the other hand, D. merely touches on some big themes, like unity in the divided empire, without going further. The *Notitia Dignitatum* and the *Peutinger Table*, for example, have both been interpreted as ideological documents seeking to illustrate unity in a divided empire: and while we may disagree with this interpretation, the subject might have deserved more attention. Each