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## Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle. Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350 - 550 AD.*

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Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle. Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350 – 550 AD*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012. Pp. xxx + 760. Cloth (ISBN 978-0-691-15290-5) \$39.95.

For late antique Christians, piety and wealth made awkward companions. For Jesus taught his disciples: "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 19:24). Peter Brown's study aims to illustrate "the rationale for the pious use of wealth" in the Christian West, from roughly 350 to 550 CE (464). He does so through his characteristic sympathy for the available sources and a sense of a long late antiquity. The age of Pope Damasus, Jerome, and Symmachus in the late fourth century was an "age of gold" (3), when Christian aristocrats like Melania the Younger could rid themselves of vast wealth through spending on churches and monasteries while a pagan like Q. Aurelius Symmachus could likewise put on dazzling consular games for his son. By comparison, Brown urges us not to imagine a church with a "capital C" (xxii). Lay Christians could be wealthy as could bishops and their own churches. But there was no worldwide organization or indeed a polity centered on Rome that had wealth at its disposal. Moreover, lay spending on churches (titular churches) was not only an urban phenomenon in the age of gold, but also a suburban one, when the wealthy built churches and martyr memorials on private estates. With tongue in cheek, Brown points out that the late fourth century was in this sense an "Age of the Camel," when the fabulously wealthy were "very large camels" trying to pass through the "eye of the needle" by getting rid of their wealth to ensure their place in heaven (xxiv). Brown also stresses that the state, state rituals, and even culture more generally were largely secular and persisted as such. All of this would change drastically within two generations. By the end of the fifth century, the Roman world was falling apart. Taxation and warfare were ruining fortunes and fragmenting Roman territory. Some benefitted from the less secure times in which they lived, but there were far fewer "very large camels" around. This book is mostly about them, those wealthy individuals who were sliding dangerously close to various forms of dependency while churches and monasteries came to be repositories of wealth. Key to this shift was the circulation of ideas, such as those of Augustine, that sanctified the notion that God placed wealth on earth for the rich to "manage" (464). Unloading wealth on Christian projects transformed the inherently deteriorating effect of riches into "treasure in Heaven," thus marrying the seemingly opposed categories of piety and wealth (88).

This much is known. But what makes this book a truly exhilarating read is typical of the author, his ability to conjure up and make palpable the sheer complexity of what seems established fact. Rather than being treated to a generalizing synthesis of Christian uses of wealth or attempts at statistical assessments, we instead encounter a series of portraits, each focused on an individual and his writings and each deeply rooted in the environments in which they lived. After four background chapters, we see, roughly chronologically, the Rome of Symmachus, Jerome, and Pope Leo; Ambrose's Milan; Augustine's North Africa; Paulinus' Campania; the Gaul of Cassian, Salvian, and Gregory of Tours. As Brown puts it, he is interested in "an unremitting sense of place" (xxii), how each of these figures was rooted to a distinct location, and most

importantly how issues of wealth and relative forms of poverty differed by region. To this end, Brown puts archaeology, inscriptions, architecture, and much else in dialogue with the literary sources. Most of us strive to do the same, but hardly with the same ability and breadth of reading. What results is a new history of the West in these two centuries, a critical time that saw, in quite real terms, the fall of Rome. It is a portrait of a fragmented, diverse empire, in which the fate of churches and the formulation of a theology of wealth had much to do with local economic and social pressures. In this, Brown's massive study is the perfect analogue to Evelyne Patlagean's equally massive *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance 4e – 7e siècles* (Paris 1977). While Patlagean was focused on Byzantium and the issue of poverty, she and Brown agree that the study of wealth or poverty must of necessity be a study of all of society. Patlagean: "la pauvreté ne pouvait en fin de compte se définir sinon par référence à toute la société" (2). Brown: "The issue of wealth flowed like a great braided river through the churches and through Roman society as a whole" (xxiv). Both books likewise share the assumption that an analysis of the terms and categories that societies use to define social realities lie at the heart of a historian's work. In Patlagean's case, she explicitly uses Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach. Though less explicit in this regard, Brown investigates changing definitions for key terms like *plebs*, *pauper*, *res publica*, *populus Romanus*, and concepts related to the familiar terminology of patronage. Most importantly, we find an ever-expanding definition of the poor, from the "shame-faced poor" to all the "poor" in society (467). Brown reminds us that *pauper* was a relational term, like recent political discourse on the "middle class" (343). Now the *populus Romanus*, in all its economic diversity, were redefined and united as the poor in need of church charity. Indeed, Brown's book was clearly written to engage our present, perhaps even distinctly U.S., sensibilities. He scatters colloquialisms throughout; however, these always illuminate rather than distract. Pope Damasus was a "Q-Tip" (254); the fate of the *annona* was like a "nuclear reactor" (111); the fourth century was full of "grassroots religious organizations" (170); Augustine and his friends were involved in "countercultural experiments" (171); there were "buzzwords" and periods of "boom and bust" (175); Trier was the "Pentagon of the West" (187); Jerome was "fundraising" in Rome and the "superego" of his patrons there (215, 267); monks were "extremists" whose challenge to the rich represented to some the "m-word" (214, 302); slaves joining Alaric's Visigothic army were walking a "freedom trail" (297); there was a "roundabout of regime changes" in the late fourth century (208); even a "Spice Girl" emerges (511).

If there is one area in which this book is lacking it is an analysis of hagiography. Brown of course knows the potential of this body of writing, and he has mined it elsewhere. Here, Brown only gestures in this direction: "Hagiographic narratives of this period stressed the miraculous abundance of wealth used for the poor" (512). These hagiographical narratives often include discourses on the shedding of wealth to attain entry into the kingdom of heaven, and often do so in terms that explicitly contrast the Hellenistic model of civic munificence and an emerging Christian model of pious giving, not for the enjoyment of the *plebs* at large, but for the poor. One example will suffice. In the so-called *Acts of the Greek Martyrs* (BHL 3970), an anonymous set of martyr acts dating perhaps from the latter half of the fifth century, we follow the fate

of a family of wealthy Greek *peregrini* in Rome at the time of the persecution of Decius (249–50 CE). They are urged by church officials to give up their vast wealth. They are told: “worldly wealth is an impediment to eternal life,” *facultates istae terrenae impedimenta sunt vitae aeternae*. The Roman authorities react to this use of wealth as a threat to political order. For the Christians, their wealth is for the poor, *pauperes*, and their remaining “treasures are their souls,” *thesauri nostri animae nostrae sunt*. Indeed, in contrast to the city of Rome and its manmade monuments, the text reiterates the claim that the kingdom of heaven is full of real treasures, perfectly laid out streets of gold, and no more destitution. It is like Rome but better, because in this heavenly kingdom it seems that everyone is rich. It remains for others to systematically study such difficult, but rich materials (difficult because of issues of dating and intended audience) for the emergence of Christian heroes of pious giving in the West. Brown’s book will serve as a guide to interpreting these materials and much else. *Through the Eye of a Needle* deserves the widest possible readership. It is a remarkable achievement.

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Frank L. Holt, *Lost World of the Golden King. In Search of Ancient Afghanistan*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2012. Pp. xxi + 343. Cloth (ISBN 978-0-520-27342-9) \$39.95.

In a previous work (*Alexander the Great and the Mystery of the Elephant Medallions*, Berkeley 2003), Holt demonstrated the capacity to make numismatics an adventure, or in that case an almost Sherlock Holmes style mystery. This book goes much further than that, both in terms of the substance, which deals in depth with the historiography of the subject, and the development of the methodologies involved in the search for ancient Afghanistan (Bactria). This is set in a lively narrative of adventure and discovery caught up in the beginnings of the Great Game between the Russian and British Empires over the region, taking it down to the modern wars and tragedies that still beset Afghanistan. Throughout the work Holt takes the subject very seriously, and displays a magisterial command of the scholarship involved.

*Lost World* opens in chapter 1, “The Adventure Begins,” with the first Western European discovery of Bactrian coins in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the first type of numismatic collection and method, “Checklist Numismatics.” This simply identified the names of what one had to presume were monarchs on the coins and the coin types, but with little interpretation. In chapter 2, “A Dangerous Game,” Holt covers the growth of numismatic material, collections, and the expansion of method in the nineteenth century into what is called “Framework Numismatics.” As the chapter title implies, this is the period of the Great Game, filled with colorful characters and marked by what Holt calls “a torrent” of coins from the ancient period (27). The methodology now advances by trying to connect the dots of the names and types of coins found. In chapter 3, “The Gold Colossus,” Holt concentrates on the Eucratidion, a giant twenty-stater gold coin of the Bactrian king Eucratides the Great, the largest gold coin known