

Embodying the Past

Embodiment and its consequences are hardly new concepts to late ancient studies. From the first stirrings of “Late Antiquity” as a period of interest, historians from Peter Brown to Averil Cameron reckoned with Michel Foucault’s claim that power was made manifest by acting on human bodies. Such an awareness shaped Brown’s conception of the ascetic’s authority and Elizabeth Clark’s apprehension of the power Melania the Younger derived from donning a rough gown.¹ Nevertheless, apart from asceticism, the late ancient body as both sensate and stimulus remains an underexplored area of study. Nor have we done enough to identify and address how our own community is still haunted by the attitudes and assumptions toward physical differences on the part of those we study. The insightful articles here, consequently, are welcome explorations of issues surrounding the body in Late Antiquity, some of which continue to resonate today.

Taking seriously the need to situate the body’s experience in specific places, Ophir Münz-Manor and Thomas Arentzen’s “Soundscapes of Salvation” examines the interplay of poetry, built environment, and sound in shaping the perceptions of both Jewish and Christian congregants in the eastern Mediterranean. Refrains were an important aspect of late ancient hymnody, and the norm was to sing them out loudly. As a result, the authors argue, hymnographers writing in Hebrew and Syriac used these practices to fill the “soundscape” with highly charged lyrics. They suggest that the auditory and somatic perception of the hymns, in turn, would bind the worshipping community together in a shared experience of deliverance.

1. *The Life of Melania the Younger*, Elizabeth Clark, ed. (New York/Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984); Averil Cameron, “Redrawing the Map: Early Christian Territory after Foucault,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986): 266–71; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

As the nuances of the Greek verb *παθεῖν* suggest, however, a human being's bodily experience may easily darken into an encounter with suffering. In this vein, Sarah Wolf's article explores the role that *yisurin* (suffering) plays in the Babylonian Talmud. In contrast with those who see the Talmud's positive portrayal of suffering as an aspect of theodicy, "Suffering and Sacrifice" contends that the text's technical approach to even mild physical discomfort speaks to its soteriological function. Like Münz-Manor and Arentzen, Wolf finds that the late ancient body's experiences are inextricably linked to the state of the inner person.

Despite the agreement across religions that the human physical form could be a site for redemption in Late Antiquity, perceptions of others' bodies sometimes incited people to embody themselves in opposition. Jessica Ehinger explores one manifestation of this tendency in the writings of Anastasius of Sinai, who portrayed Muslims as demons incarnate, albeit relatively benign ones. In "Revolutionizing the Status Quo," she argues that this ambivalent way of representing Muslims in a formerly Christian landscape both unified Chalcedonian Christians and encouraged them to feel a stronger sense of continuity with their pre-Islamic past. The Italian and Sicilian hagiographers whom Kalina Yamboliev studies, however, explicitly maligned the corporeal attributes of the invaders they named "Saracens" in a way that prefigured the racialized stereotyping of migrants among some contemporary Italians. Late ancient "discourses of opposition," she argues, "obscured the inter-reliance between populations," reducing the relations between Christians and Muslims to "inherited, primordial struggles" in a way that set the stage for some contemporary narratives.

The past thus haunts the present, not because we can draw a straight line linking attitudes between teachers and their students across the millennia, but because the texts of antiquity continue to be prized and read so often as to shape our culture. For this reason, destabilizing the power that these texts have had over the bodies they sought to define, racialize, gender, and discipline remains a necessary project, if we are to achieve full equality. Among a distressing number of recent examples, one measure of the gap between current practices and equality is the study of women scholars by Victoria Leonard and Sarah Bond. "Advancing Feminism Online" finds that gender bias still pervades the community dedicated to the study of Classics and Late Antiquity. I would welcome a submission for a subsequent issue that takes up a similar project for scholars of color. We can only move effectively toward equity in our scholarship when we

see clearly the distance we need to traverse. In the meantime, we might take inspiration from a text Elizabeth Marlowe encountered when reviewing the European “Crossroads” exhibit for this issue of *SLA*. This Italian copy of a Hebrew translation of an Arabic commentary on an ancient Greek treatise embodies the cultural entanglements that persist despite so many attempts to discipline perceived human bodily difference. ■