

James Howard-Johnston and Paul A. Hayward (eds.), *The Cults of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. x + 298 pp. ISBN 0 19 826978 1.

In 1971 Peter Brown, already known for his remarkable scholarship following the publication of a splendid biography of Saint Augustine¹ and a superb text-book on Late Antiquity,² published a paper entitled 'The rise and function of the holy man in Late Antiquity'.³ 'It falls to few of us', writes Averil Cameron at the every beginning of her contribution, 'to write an article that justifies the epithet "seminal", but Peter Brown's "Rise and function of the holy man" was certainly that' (p. 27). Together with *The World of Late Antiquity*, this paper represents a genuine transformation in the way we understand and think about Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Peter Brown elaborated his thoughts about the saints and their cults in his Haskell Lectures (1978),⁴ and subsequently revised and refined some of his observations in a series of papers and lectures.⁵ So crucial and influential were Peter Brown's contributions to the study of late antique and early medieval culture and society that his work is a constant source of inspiration and a focus of debate. In 1995 a group of scholars was gathered under the auspices of the *Istituto di studi su Cassiodoro e sul Medioevo in Calabria* to discuss Brown's observations on the cult of the saints;⁶ in 1996 scholars were gathered in Oslo to mark the quarter-centenary of *The World of Late Antiquity*;⁷ and in 1997 a different group was gathered in Berkeley to celebrate the quarter-centenary of 'The rise and function of the holy man'.⁸ The book under review is the result of yet another gathering, held in Oxford in 1996 to discuss Brown's 'Holy Man' in view of modern research. As James Howard-Johnston declares in his introduction, the principal themes of the volume under review here are triple: '(1) the processes involved in the construction of hagiographical texts, (2) the contribution of such texts to the creation and advertisement of saints' cults, and (3) the vested interests served by such cults and the texts which promoted them' (p. 15).

The eleven papers collected by the editors (not all of which were delivered at the Oxford gathering) are divided into five sections. In the first section, entitled 'The Cult of Saints in Peter Brown', the two 'doyens' of late antique Christianity offer some of their thoughts on the contribution of Peter Brown. In her paper 'On Defining the Holy Man' (pp. 27-43), Averil Cameron examines Peter Brown's work against the wider background of late antique culture and religion, and directs the attention of future scholars to two major points: 'the connections between the broader issues of asceticism and the concept of the Christian holy man' (p. 36); and the nature of our sources and the relationship they bear to the changing reality of Late Antiquity or, as Philip Rousseau defines it, 'the problem of textuality' (p. 50). Similar observations are also made in Philip Rousseau's critical scrutiny of Peter Brown's 'Holy Man' ('Ascetics as Mediators and as Teachers', pp. 45-59). The second section of the book focuses on Eastern Christendom, and includes two papers. In her contribution — "'For Next to God, You are my Salvation": Reflections on the Rise of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity' (pp. 63-81) — Claudia Rapp moves away from hagiography by examining collections of letters written by or addressed to holy men. These letters, as she puts it, are 'the closest thing to the oral ideal that has survived', and help us 'to

¹ *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London 1967).

² *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Mohammed* (London 1971).

³ *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80-101; reprinted in idem, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (London 1982), 103-52.

⁴ Published as *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christendom* (Chicago 1981).

⁵ See, most notably, 'The saint as exemplar in Late Antiquity', *Representations* 2 (1983), 1-25; and *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World*, The Tanner Lectures 1993 (Cambridge 1995).

⁶ Published under the title 'Il culto dei santi', *Cassiodorus* 2 (1996).

⁷ Published as 'SO debate: The World of Late Antiquity Revisited', *Symbolae Osloenses* 72 (1997), 5-90.

⁸ Now published as 'Charisma and Authority: The 25th Anniversary of Peter Brown's Analysis of the Late Antique Holy Man', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998).

understand better the importance of prayer and its role in shaping early notions of brotherhood and spiritual leadership' (p. 81). Paul Magdalino's paper — "'What we Heard in the Lives of the Saints we have Seen with our Own Eyes": The Holy Man as Literary Text in Tenth-Century Constantinople' (pp. 83-112) — masterfully examines two hagiographical texts from tenth-century Byzantium, namely *The Life of Andrew the Fool* and *The Life of Basil the Younger*, against the background of the political-religious discourse in tenth-century Constantinople. The third section, although entitled 'The Cults of Saints in Western Christendom', focuses mainly on the Frankish kingdoms of the early Middle Ages. In his confused paper ('Demystifying the Role of Sanctity in Western Christendom', pp. 115-42), Paul Anthony Hayward views 'hagiographical texts as forensic pieces of writing, which both served sectional interests (those which stood to gain from the promotion of a type of cult or a specific cult) and were intended to shape the ambient thought-world of society at large' (p. 9). This observation, of course, is not at all new. It was the Czech historian František Graus who first noted that late antique and early medieval hagiography is, in one way or another, a form of propaganda,⁹ and many scholars since have followed suit.¹⁰ In his analysis Hayward focuses on the works of Gregory of Tours. But, alas, he knows too little about Gregory himself or about the Merovingian society he lived in and wrote for, to offer any intelligent observations. Unlike Hayward's paper, the two other contributions to this section are fascinating. Paul Fouracre's paper on the cults of saints in late Merovingian and early Carolingian Francia ('The Origins of the Carolingians' Attempt to Regulate the Cult of Saints', pp. 143-65), and Ian Wood's paper on the *Vitae* of missionaries in the early Middle Ages ('The Missionary Life', pp. 167-183), offer illuminating discussions on the development of cults of saints and the writing of hagiography in the early medieval West. Following Peter Brown's example in attempting 'to keep the scene wide' (p. 5), the editors also included in this collection two papers on holy men in medieval Russia (by Paul A. Hollingsworth and Richard M. Price), and two papers on similar phenomena in Islam (by Chase Robinson and Joseph W. Meri).

As is to be expected in a volume of this sort, the essays are not uniformly successful in addressing the issues and problems envisioned by the editors. Nevertheless, most of the articles are thought-provoking and stimulating explorations of new questions. Even if one does not always agree with the conclusions of some of the authors, they pose questions worth asking and trying to answer. True, Peter Brown's ideas and observations can be questioned and refined. But it takes colossal hubris to declare, as does Paul Anthony Hayward in his shallow paper, that 'Brown's argument is so indebted to British social anthropology and it overturns Gibbon so neatly that it invites suspicion' (p. 123). Does he suggest that Peter Brown merely followed fashion for its own sake, or made scholarly judgements on any basis other than an honest interpretation of the evidence? Humility, it seems, is a rare quality among scholars; but even if we do not agree with our predecessors or understand them, we should at least give full credit to their intellectual integrity. What Hayward and a few of the contributors to this volume forget is that Peter Brown's glory is not that he said the last word on anything, but that he said the first word about so many things. This is, to my mind, what makes him the greatest scholar of our generation.

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⁹ Volk, *Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger* (Prague 1965).

¹⁰ See, for example, Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton 1993); Thomas Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints: The Diocese of Orléans* (Cambridge 1990).