

ANCIENT INSCRIPTIONS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

SITZ (A.M.) *Pagan Inscriptions, Christian Viewers. The Afterlives of Temples and Their Texts in the Late Antique Eastern Mediterranean*. Pp. xxviii + 321, ills, maps. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Cased, £71, US\$110. ISBN: 978-0-19-766643-2.

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The fate of late antique cities, now generally labelled as transformation, not decline, has been hotly debated in modern scholarship from the classic book of A.H.M Jones (*The Later Roman Empire, 284–602: a Social, Economic and Administrative Survey*, vol. I [1964], pp. 757–8; cf. F. Haarer, ‘Developments in the Governance of Late Antique Cities’, in: *Governare e riformare l'impero al momento della sua divisione: Oriente, Occidente, Illirico* [2015]). One thing clearly associated with the transformation of the late antique city was the profound alteration of epigraphic culture after the mid-third century CE. Almost everywhere in the Mediterranean epigraphic production declined so significantly (K. Nawotka et al., ‘Conclusions: One or Many Epigraphic Cultures in the Eastern Mediterranean’, in: K. Nawotka [ed.], *Epigraphic Culture in the Eastern Mediterranean in Antiquity* [2021], pp. 232–9, with graphs 11.1 and 11.2) that it can be said that the end of the third century marks the terminus of what L. Robert called ‘civilisation de l'épigraphie’ (‘Les épigraphies et l'épigraphie grecque et romain’, in: L. Robert, *Opera minora selecta*, vol. V [1989], p. 66). Nonetheless, in the beginning of late antiquity cities and temples were brimming with inscriptions executed in earlier ages. In this book S. questions the prevailing attitude of most modern epigraphers and historians, who look at ancient inscriptions exclusively in their original historical context, and aims at investigating the fate of pre-fourth-century (‘classical’ in her terminology) inscriptions in late antiquity, mostly but not exclusively those from pagan temples. S. wants to know whether they were read by late antique Christians, how their viewers/readers interacted with them, and what role inscriptions played in shaping attitudes of the majority Christian population of late antique cities with regard to pagan temples.

The book stems from S.'s 2017 Ph.D. dissertation ‘The Writing on the Wall: Inscriptions and Memory in the Temples of Late Antique Greece and Asia Minor’. S. deals mostly with Asia Minor, with occasional forays into Egypt, North Africa, Phoenicia, Transjordan, continental Greece and Italy. The bulk of the discussion is limited to the period from the fourth to the sixth centuries. S.'s book is organised into six chapters, including introduction and conclusions, and is accompanied by an ample bibliography and a (general) index. S. bases her argument on selected passages from late antique authors, both non-Christian (Ammianus Marcellinus) and Christian (Agathias, Prokopios etc.), on the analysis of surviving temples in their archaeological context and on a small number of ancient inscriptions. Each chapter contains several case studies, which seem highly relevant to the topic, even though readers are not informed on the basis of what criteria the case studies were selected. The quality of the images of the inscriptions could be better. The way of ‘correcting’ ancient texts is sometimes contrary to the professed standards of the Leiden convention (e.g. $\tau\epsilon\acute{\iota}\chi\omicron\varsigma$ instead of $\tau\acute{\iota}\chi\omicron\varsigma$, p. 29 n. 7).

In Chapter 1, ‘Introduction: Afterlives of Inscriptions’, S. makes a number of statements defining her approach to classical inscriptions in late antiquity, the most important being the view underpinning the book that in late antiquity inscriptions from earlier times were ‘active agents in shaping late antique views of the (pagan) past’ (p. 6). She is

interested in the impact that the content and physical appearance of classical inscriptions had on people in late antiquity.

In Chapter 2, 'The Use of Real or Imagined Inscriptions in Late Antique Literature', S. accepts the majority view on the limited use of inscriptions by classical authors. She quotes examples of late antique authors who consulted classical inscriptions (pp. 30–8). The most remarkable example is the Adulis inscription copied by Kosmas Indikopleustes and, as S. correctly remarks, 'quoted by scholars of the Hellenistic period as a key witness of Ptolemaic self-representation without even mentioning its late antique transmission history' (p. 41). She further presents controversies surrounding the fragmentary inscription from Hieropolis (*SEG* 30.1479) tied to the *Life of Abercius* as an example of appropriating inscriptions in hagiographies (pp. 52–65). The cases gleaned by S. from late antique literature prove that some inscriptions were read by writers of this age.

Chapter 3, 'Preservation: Tolerating Temples and Their Texts', the longest and pivotal for the book, tries to demonstrate the nuanced approach of late antique Christians to pagan temples and inscriptions. S. wants to show that some temple buildings were preserved and that classical inscriptions associated with them were read in late antiquity. She gathers examples of pagan temples converted into churches (pp. 120–1) or functioning as museums frequented by Christian visitors (pp. 79–90). In these cases inscriptions on temple walls survived untouched (pp. 120–34). More difficult is her attempt to show that classical inscriptions were read in late antiquity, not only tolerated (pp. 143–5).

Another major issue is the re-use of inscribed stones in late antiquity, covered in Chapter 4, 'Spoliation: Integrating and Scrambling tions-Inscrip'. S. asks important questions concerning spoliation in antiquity, as to whether it involved economy, aesthetics or ideology (pp. 147–8), but strangely omits some of the best-known examples of the practice – for example, the post-Herulian wall in Athens constructed on purely practical principles. In fact, only Gerasa might make a case for ideology in the reuse of classical inscriptions (pp. 147–55). The chapter reviews a few cases of epigraphic spolia used in churches (pp. 155–83). S. maintains that there were decisions about spoliation, often to preserve the inscribed stones (pp. 193–201).

Erasure is discussed in Chapter 5, 'Erasure: [[*Damnatio Memoriae*]] or Conscious Uncoupling', in the context of defacing ancient statues. S. notes that the mutilation of statues was often advertised in Christian writings (pp. 208–12) unlike erasures, never mentioned in literary sources (pp. 257–9). The fate of inscriptions is less obvious. S.'s statement 'inscriptions preserved on temple walls and those spoliated for new building projects were *probably* read' (p. 202) is no less conjectural than similar statements elsewhere in the book. S. juxtaposes erasures in pagan inscriptions with *damnatio memoriae*, being a performative act attested mostly in centres of power, aiming at political narrative (pp. 218–20). Erasures of names of pagan gods and derivative names are attested usually in principal cities such as Aphrodisias, where they were sponsored by municipal authorities (pp. 223–32). S. shows that the issue of erasure is complex, comparable to that of abandoned or reused temples (pp. 263–4).

Chapter 6, 'Conclusions: Unepigraphic Readings', conveys an optimistic picture of the fate of pre-fourth-century inscriptions and temples in late antiquity. The lack of hard evidence means that this is inevitably conjectural, even if S. tries to present her hypotheses as facts, advocating a 'living text' approach to inscriptions (p. 268). S. puts forward the case for active preservation, peaceful abandonment, reuse as churches and spoliation of pagan temples (p. 273). In her view the evidence speaks to conservationist attitudes of people in late antiquity towards inscriptions (p. 274).

This is an interesting book, which asks important questions about the fate of classical inscriptions in late antiquity. Nevertheless, it harbours a number of statements unsupported

by evidence. S.'s assertion (pp. 17–20) 'That a significant number of individuals in late antiquity *could* read is clear' is not anchored in sources, and the sharply diminished epigraphic output after *c.* 250 CE suggests declining literacy in late antiquity. Or 'As we have seen, most ancient inscriptions say very little about the gods, but a lot about land ownership, city territorial rights, taxation privileges, and the men and women who put up monuments for those gods' (p. 273). In fact, these categories of inscriptions are very rare; for example, in Didyma two inscriptions dealing with land ownership and territorial rights survived (*Didyma* 486, 492), versus 69 dedications and 10 oracles (*Didyma* 72–140, 496–505). But these are all small points that do not affect the value of S.'s book. If any weaknesses can be identified, it is the obvious deficiency of source material that rarely gives answers to the questions about the fate of classical inscriptions in late antiquity. With this in mind one should take note of the wording of the title *Pagan Inscriptions, Christian Viewers*, not *Christian Readers*.

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