

*Late Antiquity*, edited by G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar

reviewed by [Robert M. Grant](#) in the [April 5, 2000](#) issue

When Arnaldo Momigliano was at the University of Chicago he used to argue that we should teach not "church history" but just "history." This is the implicit view of most of the contributors to this large, well-illustrated volume. The editors urge readers to use this impressive guide "with enterprise and patience," especially by choosing the right terms to look up. Eleven well-constructed essays on major themes in the modern study of late antiquity precede the book's brief, solid and up-to-date encyclopedia-style articles.

Sometimes the selection of topics seems incomplete. Though there are articles on both astrology and astronomy, there is none on the sun or the moon. The Venerable Bede receives too little attention. At least nine articles seem to overlap—notably, "Monasticism—Monks," "Image of—Monks" and "Status of—Monks." The index picks up some omitted names, but one of these, "Galen," just takes the reader to "Pharmacy." Galen's place in medicine and surgery and his attitude toward Jews and Christians are not mentioned. The section on burial does not talk about the Greco-Roman and early Jewish elements that survive in the practices of late antiquity, while the discussions on miracles and on liturgy are limited to the church. The omission of ancient Corinth is surprising, since years have been devoted to its excavation.

But omissions and superfluities are inevitable in such a book. Most questions about "why this and not that?" can be answered, "because of limitations of space or of human choice." On the whole, the editors' choice of topics is sound, and they have included many admirable illustrations, often in color.

A more basic question concerns the editors' motivation. What impels so many scholars to investigate late antiquity? "We are dealing with a distinctive civilization, whose density and sheer tenacity, on a humble level that we had hitherto barely suspected, demands some form of overall treatment," the editors state. Are they simply redoing Edward Gibbon for modern readers? Or are they trying to set church history in its fuller context, secular as well as religious? Whatever their precise goal, their book will be of great interest to everyone concerned with the origins of modern

religion, politics and culture.