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BETWEEN TWO EXTREMES THE END AS A PRINCIPLE: THE LATE ANTIQUITY OF PETER BROWN 50 YEARS LATER.

ENTRE DOIS EXTREMOS O FIM COMO PRINCÍPIO: A ANTIGUIDADE TARDIA DE PETER BROWN 50 ANOS DEPOIS.

INTERVIEW WITH PETER BROWN

ENTREVISTA COM PETER BROWN

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Vir eloqventissimvs ac doctissimvs […] Peter Brown emerges among the giants of humanistic erudition, which would need no further introduction. He is recognized for having transferred to political and social history the concept of Late Antiquity (derived from German art history at the beginning of the 20th century), which, in the end, became a new field of historical investigations. In 1971, with the publication of his The World of Late Antiquity (Thames & Hudson), he demonstrated that more than a transition period between Antiquity and the Middle Ages, this period would have its own characteristics, in a time and space circumscribed by the creations and innovations of the civilizations of the Mediterranean surroundings, certainly heirs of Greco-Latin traditions and institutions.

Peter Robert Lamont Brown was born into a Protestant family in Dublin (1935) and graduated from *New College*, University of Oxford (1956). At the same University, he became a prize fellow and, subsequently, a research fellow at *All Souls College*, Oxford, a position he occupied until 1972. Began (but did not complete) a doctoral thesis under the external supervision of Arnaldo Momigliano (at that time professor of ancient history at University College London). In 1975, after a

brief stint as a visiting professor at the *University of California* at Berkeley, he took up the chair of Modern History at the *Royal Holloway College*, University of London, holding the position until 1977, when he returned to Berkeley to take over as professor of Classics and History studies, a position he would hold until 1986.

In the fall of 1986, he became professor of History at Princeton University, a position he held formally until 2011. In 1979 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 1988 to the Medieval Academy of America, and 1995 to the American Philosophical Society, received recognition as a Doctor *Honoris Causa* by twenty universities, half of them in the United States. Throughout his vast career, he has given hundreds of conferences, received several important academic awards and distinctions, having published dozens of individual and collective books and hundreds of articles.

This year 2021 marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of its last The World of Late Antiquity and the Revista Diálogos Mediterrânicos through the Center for Mediterranean Studies of the Federal University of Paraná had the honor of being able to talk to Professor Peter Brown.

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INTERVIEW

Professor Peter Brown, on behalf of *Diálogos Mediterrânicos*, I would like to thank you for your willingness to give this interview and to emphasize that it is a great honor for me to be able to speak with you.

1. **You are considered one of the most important historians of our time. The profession of historian was a choice? Could you briefly tell us about your trajectory and your influences?**

PB: My decision to become a historian owed much to my background. I grew up in Sudan, where my father worked in the railways until 1947, and in the Republic of Ireland. My family were members of the Protestant minority in a very Catholic Ireland. This meant that, in both places, my family were outsiders. In Sudan this was obvious: the overwhelming majority of the Muslim

population were alien to us. But in Ireland, also, we were aware that we did not share many of the beliefs and values of the majority of our Irish, Catholic compatriots. The sense of a distance between myself and those around me – of being on the edge of worlds to which I did not fully belong was what both disquieted me and inspired me to explore those different worlds.

Hence my interest in the past has always been less that it was **past** than that it was **different**. Time had made it as different from me as the populations of Sudan or of Catholic Ireland were different from me and my family. Between me and the past there lay that chasm of **difference** that I was resolved, from an early age, to overcome –to step across some boundary in the mind; to enter worlds whose richness had been held back from me by ignoranceand prejudice. Whether this was the Later Empire, in the distant past, or my native Ireland, in the present, this was the first step that mattered. Looking back, it seems that I had taken this step from my childhood onwards. Without the challenge of **difference,** I would not have become a historian.

2. **In his academic career as a historian, three names seem to have a very strong presence in terms of research and methodological options: Arnaldo Momigliano, André Piganiol and Henri-Irénée Marrou. What role do you assign to these historians in your intellectual background?**

PB: When I came to Oxford as an undergraduate student in 1952, I was aware that I wanted to study periods at a great distance from the present because they were so different from the present. Had I been an anthropologist, I might have been happy to study a contemporary society markedly different from my own; or, even if I was a theologian, a religious system – say, Buddhism – markedly different from my own belief-system: it was the challenge of difference that attracted me. A sense of the difference between the Catholic Middle Ages and the modern world was what instantly attracted me on arriving in Oxford. In Oxford, the Middle Ages seemed to live on in the beauty of its Gothic buildings and its country churches. What had it been like to live in that distant, very different time, whose monuments surrounded me and drew my eyes to their intricate carvings and to the glowing figures in theirstained glass windows?

As a student in Oxford, I studied medieval and modern history – not the history of the ancient world. But, while I studied the High Middle Ages for my final examination, I realized that my interests had slipped yet further back in time to the period that was called“The Birth of the Middle

Ages" – to the centuries when a new Europe arose from the ruins of the Roman Empire. In 1956I took my final examinations and committed myself to the study of that period as a young researcher.

In doing this, I was inspired by a number of great books and by a few great scholars. I deliberately use the word "inspired". They were more than "methodological options" for me.

Why was this so? In 1950s Oxford, the research of graduate students was not directed, as on a European model, by seminars and by courses where methodological options might be advocated by professors and discussed by students. I was left to myself to make my own methodology out of my own, largely undirected reading. Hence the huge importance for me of the figures whom you mention. They did much more than instruct me: they inspired me, and gave me the courage to continue in what was, at that time, a lonely intellectual trajectory.

Each inspired me in a different way. Arnaldo Momigliano was my designated supervisor for a thesis on "The Social and Economic Position of the Roman Aristocracy in the Sixth Century AD". Momigliano taught in London and I was attached to All Souls College in Oxford. We seldom met and he did little to direct my research. Instead, he played a much more important role to me than that of a mere supervisor: he was an Ego Ideal. He stood for European scholarship in its most wide and generous manifestation. His vast knowledge of the historiography of the ancient world from classical times to the present reassured me that I was never alone: he showed that almost every problem that preoccupied scholars of the Later Empire in the present had already been discussed by European scholars since the Renaissance. He directed my attention unfailingly not only to **what** scholars said about different themes of ancient history. He showed **why** they said it, in what wider cultural context, and with what long-term consequences.

Thanks to Momigliano, I have always seen history as more than mere problem-solving. For Momigliano, to resolve any question about the ancient world involved listening to the long dialogue of Europe on the nature of its own past. As I came to know him better over the years, Momigliano's commitment to a historiographical approach to contemporary scholarship – his acute respect for the constant effort of historians of all kinds, in all ages and in all countries, to reach an understanding of the past -- accounted for a rare intellectual generosity on his part, and for a truly cosmopolitan vision that was lacking in the more parochial world of British scholarship at that time.

It was to European scholars that I turned as an undergraduate and as a graduate student. I read *L'Empire chrétien* of André Piganiol as the first account of the fourth century AD that was not overshadowed by the notion of decline and fall. Here was a Roman empire no longer seen as living

in the shadow of a death sentence. Nor was it a mere shell of its old self. It had not been entirely ruined by the crisis of the third century, as Mikhail Rostovtzeff (whom I had already read in Ireland) had supposed. [1] Neither was it caught in the grip of some deep-seated process of decadence, as was the notable opinion of Otto Seeck: "It was not the Germans who brought the Roman Empire to its downfall; rather, an inner illness laid it waste" [2]. Far from it. Until brought to its knees by barbarian warlords, the Roman empire – for all its ancient ills – was still a going concern. I went out of my way to mark heavily Piganiol's last sentence:

> La civilisation romaine n'est pas morte de sa belle mort.
>
> Elle a été assassinée.
>
> Roman civilization did not die a natural death. It was murdered.[3]

I would add also the great Italian scholar, Santo Mazzarino, whose *Stilicone* (and later his *Aspetti socialie del quarto secolo*[4]) impressed me greatly. The first page of Mazzarino's Preface to his *Stilicone* gave me the answer to Seeck:

The history of the later empire is in some ways a relatively young field of inquiry: long thought of as a history of imperial "decadence" (the history of a "lower" empire) it appeared above all in a negative light in relation to the periods that had preceded it … The effort to give this period a historical autonomy and a positive function is, one might say, a relatively new achievement. [5]

In this way, Mazzarino, like Piganiol, showed me how to write about the political and social history of the Later Empire without invoking the notion of inevitable decline.

And so my reading raised a further question. The overwhelming majority of studies of the Later Empire had treated this period as if it was no more than an anxious prelude to the imminent Fall of Rome. But what I had found in Piganiol and Mazzarino suggested otherwise: there was a lot more life in the Later Empire than we had thought. Far from being an awkward hiatus between the ancient world and the Middle Ages it seemed to be a period with a vitality of its own. But, in order to become

[1] ROSTOVTZEFF, Mikhail Ivanovich. *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926.

[2] SEECK, Otto Karl. *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt. Band 1* (1895: last edition, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1921-1922), p.191.

[3] PIGANIOL, André. *L'empire chrétien.* Glotz, Histoire générale: Histoire romaine IV, p.2. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947, p.422.

[4] MAZZARINO, Santo. *Aspetti sociali del quarto secolo.*Rome: Bretschneider, 1951.

[5] MAZZARINO, Santo. *Stilicone. La crisi imperiale dopo Teodosio.* Rome: Signorelli, 1942, p.v. (reprinted Milan: Rizzoli, 1990, with a most perceptive introduction by Andrea Giardina.

a field of study in its own right, the period needed a name. This name was provided for me by yet another giant among European scholars – Henri-Irénée Marrou.

It is difficult to exaggerate my debts to Marrou. The most obvious debt is that he gave me, for the first time, as a young student in 1956, the term of "Late Antiquity". He borrowed this term from German art historians who had used it to describe the art of the period between 200 and 600 AD as if it was a vigorous cultural epoch of its own. He deliberately used the original German term, *Spätantike*.

German, which welcomes neologisms with ease, has developed the habit of speaking of *Spätantike* [Late Antiquity].[6]

This suggestion was crucial. From then onwards, I had a name for the period that had begun to intrigue me: "Late Antiquity".

By using the term "Late Antiquity" Marrou made plain that he had changed his mind. He had written his *grande thèse* (*Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*)to show that Saint Augustine was a *lettré de la décadence*– the product of a decadent educational system. Then, twelve years later, he declared that he now thought differently. He argued that the culture of the 4th and 5th centuries was far from being dead. It was taking on vigorous new forms – the extraordinary blending of classical and Christian in works such as Augustine's *Confessions* and *City of God* being the known examples of a late antique sensibility.

Marrou made his views plain in a remarkable *Retractatio*– a critique of the notion of decadence which had pervaded his *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*. He now presented it as a culture which had changed, subtly but irrevocably, from classical times; but (like the empire itself) it had retained much of its ancient vigor. He could no longer say that:

> Saint Augustine and, with him, the culture of his times were, as it were, being swept way on a current hurtling towards a void. No ….
>
> The civilization of the later empire [the *Bas-Empire*], as it is reflected in the culture of Augustine, is a vigorous organism, still evolving.[7]

To this I added in the margin of my copy, in capital letters, "Hurrah! Hurrah!!"

[6] MARROU, Henri-Irénée. *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* with*Retractatio*, Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 145 bis (Paris: de Boccard, 1949): *Retractatio*, p. 694.

[7] MARROU, *Retractatio... op. cit*, p.689.

In later years, I owed much more than that to Marrou. Here my debt was less to Marrou as the exponent of the culture of Augustine, so much as to Marrou as a model historian of ancient culture as a whole. Marrou showed the hand of a master in his ability to join the creative life of individuals to the wider frame of their culture. As he made clear in a note from some time after 1943: "All my theory of culture aims to throw light on the relation of personal thought to its milieu, to its tradition, to the community." [8]

In 1956, I was unaware of his other masterpiece, the *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité*, which had appeared a year before the *Retractatio.* Marrou's change of mind on the issue of decadence had plainly been due to his writing the *Histoire de l'éducation*, which revealed the impressive staying power and capacity for renewal over the centuries of the Greco-Roman system of education. Of the two books, the *Histoire de l'éducation* was the one on which I would draw most frequently in later years. Marrou's evocation of the basic aims and structure of the educational system of the Hellenistic and Roman periods remains a masterpiece. His conclusion to the first volume – entitled "L'humanisme classique" – are truly golden pages, to which I would still draw the attention of any scholar engaged with any system of traditional education in any pre-industrial society.[9]

3. In his vast work, two themes are placed in a very particular way: from the historical point of view "Christianity"; and from a historiographical point of view, "Late Antiquity". Could you tell us a little about how these themes - although inseparable - caught your attention?

PB: Here I would emphasize the importance of my Irish Protestant background. I grew up in a society where religion still played a major role. Whatever my own beliefs, it was natural for me to take religion seriously. Coming from Ireland to study in a more liberal, less confessionally divided England, I was puzzled by the urbane indifference to religion of many of my English friends and colleagues. In the 1950s and 1960s, in both ancient and medieval history, religious factors tended to be overlooked in favor of social and political explanations. This struck me as naïve. For me, religious conflict and religious intolerance were still live issues. I began my work on Saint Augustine with the conflict between Catholics and Donatists in Roman North Africa, and with a study of Augustine's attitude to religious coercion.[10] Indeed, in the first decade of my scholarly activity, I deliberately

[8] MARROU, Henri-Irénée. *Carnets posthumes*, XI (3) 77, ed. Françoise Marrou-Flamant. Paris: Le Cerf, 2006, p.355.

[9] MARROU, Henri-Irénée. *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité.* Paris: Le Seuil, 1948, p.323-336.

[10] BROWN, Peter. Religious Dissent in the Later Roman Empire: the Case of North Africa, *History* 46 (1961), p.83-101, reprinted in *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London: Faber, 1972), p.237-257; Religious Coercion in the Later Roman Empire: the Case of North Africa, *History* 48, 1963, p.283-305 in *Religion and Society*, pp.301-331; and

turned to the Later Roman Empire to trace the origins of the power based on religion which was such a marked feature of medieval and Post-Reformation Europe.

My increasingly frequent adoption of the term "Late Antiquity" coincided with a widening of my field of study. I became less concerned with issues of religious conflict, intolerance and the exercise of state power in the relations between organized churches, and more interested in wider themes, such as the overall religious mood of late antiquity – a mood often shared to an unexpected degree by pagans, Jews and Christians -- in a geographical area that reached far beyond the frontiers of the Roman Empire.

My study of the diffusion of Manichaeism marked the beginning of a swing to the East by which I turned from the study of Saint Augustine to an interest in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. [11] This move to the East was one of the turning points of my scholarly career. It included my learning Hebrew, Syriac, and eventually, Coptic, Armenian, and Ethiopic. For me, "Late Antiquity" has always conjured up for me that opening of horizons on to a wider world that emerged when the vivid but narrow circle of the classical Mediterranean opened itself up to the rich hinterland of Africa and the Middle East, as happened after the year 200 AD.

4. **Regarding your research procedures, what are your starting points usually? I mean, do you look from the present to the past, or do you prefer to start with specific questions from the past and bring them to the present?**

PB: As I explained, my interest in the past has always been driven by an acute sense of its **difference** from the present. For this reason I have been careful to avoid projecting into the past concerns and agendas that belong to our present age. To do this would be to create a false familiarity with the past. I notice that, in my research. I have often concentrated on those aspects of the past that strike modern persons as peculiarly alien and, even, distasteful –holly men, relics, sexual renunciation. I consider that my work is successful when the reader comes to feel that it is **we** who are strange - that the world that we take for granted would have appeared to be quite as unusual to those whom we study as they now seem strange to us.

Augustine's Attitude to Religious Coercion, *Journal of Roman Studies* 54, 1964, p.107-116, in *Religion and Society…op. cit.*, pp.260-278.

[11] BROWN, Peter. The Diffusion of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 59, 1969, p.92-10, in *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine*, p.94-118.

This does not mean that I do not study issues which continue to affect us deeply -- intolerance, sexuality, wealth and poverty. But our first duty is to study them as the product of ages and societies that are different from our own. Only in this way can their study be of real help to us by throwing light on aspects of our own culture that might otherwise have escaped our notice. "Presentism" – the urge to study in the past only those issues which affect us in the immediate present – is the formula for suffocating that respect for strangeness – for the resolute otherness of the past -- which is, perhaps, the greatest gift of all that historians can bring to our own age.

5. Even though your written work has a specific methodological rigor, it is often noted that his language is quite accessible. Is it a concern for you to address for everyone?

PB: This issue concerns me greatly. I grew up in a small country, within an even smaller group –the Protestants. Yet within these narrow circles art and literature circulated vigorously. Leading Protestants contributed handsomely to the Gaelic Revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – W.B. Yeats, John Millicent Synge and, later, Bernard Shaw. These authors all thought it to be their duty to speak to as wide a public as possible so as to create a healthy public culture for a new nation. I have always valued the remark of W.B. Yeats (writing in 1891):

To please the folk of few books is one's great aim. By being Irish I think one has a better chance of it – over here is so much to read and think about.[12]

I feel the same. Historians of late antique society and religion often have to study topics which require a great deal of methodological sophistication. Not to turn to those disciplines would be as absurd as to attempt to study the economic history of a modern nation without knowledge of economic theory. But then the historian has to translate these discoveries into the common language of educated persons. To do otherwise is to insult one's readers and to fail in one's duty as a historian. For there is an elitism implicit in the use of jargon that is inconsistent with an open, democratic society.

[12] FOSTER, Robert Fitzroy. *W.B. Yeats. A Life, I. The Apprentice Mage.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.110-111.

6. The study of Christianity is a guiding element in his work. It is possible to find recurring points in both Western and Eastern Christianity. Can the idiosyncrasies of religion for different cultures (West / East) be interpreted as two worlds that walk on opposite sides?

PB: Ever since the time of Mazzarino's *Stilicone,* the contrast between the eastern and the western regions of the Roman Empire has been a primary concern for historians. The different destinies of the two regions has led us to rephrase our narrative of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Instead of asking why did the Roman Empire decline and fall, we now ask why did the Roman Empire decline and fall **only in the West?**

The modern study of Late Antiquity began in the 1960s with a switch in the interests of ancient historians towards the study of the rich and diverse culture of the Greek world in the late antique period. I was fortunate to play apart in a general awakening of interest in the Eastern Empire among English scholars, all of whom I knew personally and whose books and articles appeared almost every year with some new insight on this strange new hybrid – a Greek Roman Empire of the East. [13] This English contingent was matched by the work of French Byzantinists on the rise of Constantinople, by Gilbert Dagron, [14] and by the study of poverty in Byzantium, by Évelyne Patlagean – a masterpiece worthy of Fernand Braudel's notion of an *histoire totale.*[15]

This "recovery of the East" as a thriving Christian society inevitably affects our judgments on the relations between the Latin and the Greek churches. American and European scholarship has tended to move from the study of the Latin Fathers to those of the Greek world. Its center of gravity no longer lies in the West, with the towering figure of Saint Augustine.

This is shown by the papers presented at the International Patristic Conference, which takes place in Oxford every four years. When I first attended this Conference in 1963, I was fortunate to be working on Augustine. He stood at the very center of the Patristic world. At the conference, the study of Augustine and of a few major Greek Fathers predominated. It was like a massive grove

[13] HOPKINS, Keith. Eunuchs and Politics in the Later Roman Empire, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 139, 1963, p.62-80 now in *Conquerors and Slaves.* Cambridge University Press, 1978, p.172-196; JONES, Arnold Hugh Martin. *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602: A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1964; LIEBESCHUETZ, John Hugo Wolfgang Gideon. *Antioch: City and Imperial Administration in the Later Roman Empire.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972; CAMERON, Alan. *Circus Factions.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976; CAMERON, Averil. *Procopius and the Sixth Century.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985; MILLAR, Fergus. *A Greek Roman Empire.* Sather Classical Lectures 64 Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

[14] DAGRON, Gilbert. L'Empire romain d'Orient au IV^{e} siècle et les traditions politiques de l'Hellénisme: Le témoignage de Thémistius, *Travaux et Mémoires* 3 (1968); p.1-242; *Naissance d'une capitale: Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 à 451.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974.

[15] PATLAGEAN, Evelyne. *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance, 4^{e} – 7^{e} siècles.* École des Hautes Études en sciences sociales: Civilisations et Sociétés 48. Paris/Le Haye: Mouton, 1977.

surrounded by a mere scattering of other trees. Now this is no longer so. If anything, Augustine is neglected, and texts from the Christian East (in Greek, Syriac and Coptic, along with many other eastern languages) fill the landscape as far as the eye can reach.

And these texts are now owned by everyone. No one church or variant of Christianity claims a monopoly of any authors. The comfortable, false familiarity of those who once claimed Augustine, Ambrose or Basil of Caesarea for themselves alone has largely disappeared among scholars. Jews and Christians, Catholics and Evangelicals, mainline Protestants and Mormons find nothing strange in sinking their minds into Christians of the Middle East, such as Ephrem the Syrian, Jacob of Sarugh or Philoxenos of Mabbug, as writers as much deserving of attention as the Greek and Latin Fathers whose works still dominated the conference in 1963.

It is in this way that the notion of "Late Antiquity" has played a role in the widening of the horizons of Christian scholarship to an extent undreamed of in the 1960ss. The division between the Latin and the Greek Church, which had once dominated traditional scholarship, has been replaced by a wider sense of Late Antique Christianity. Our attention is no longer riveted on the relations between Rome and Constantinople. Rather, Christianity is seen to stretch like a vast galaxy from Ireland to the borders of China. Cultural zones with fluid boundaries, often linked to distinctive language groups – Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopic (and, in the West, Old Irish) form a chain of "micro-Christendoms", each significantly different from the other. [16]. This view of a world-wide Christianity has replaced the old emphasis on an ineluctable conflict between Greek East and Latin West. As the papers offered at the Patristic Conference show, this is all for the best. We owe much to those young scholars who are now prepared to commit themselves to learning oriental languages. They have opened a treasure house whose riches remain to be explored.

7. His first work on the biography of Saint Augustine - widely acclaimed by critics - still represents a prime reference today for any scholar who intends to establish a study on the Bishop of Hippo. To what do you attribute such topicality?

PB: Yet despite this swing to the East, Augustine remains, like a long familiar monument. It is his thought, and not those of the Greek Fathers, which still runs in the veins of Western Christians. And Augustine still remains to be discovered. One of the thrills of the 1980s and 1990s was the discovery of hitherto unknown letters and sermons of Augustine that threw a new light on many

[16] BROWN, Peter. *The Rise of Western Christendom. Triumph and Diversity A.D. 200-1000: Tenth Anniversary Revised Edition.* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, p.355-379.

aspects of his life as a bishop and preacher in Africa. One of the joys of writing an epilogue to my *Augustine of Hippo* (which I did in2000) was the opportunity to hail some of those discoveries. We now have twenty-nine further letters from Augustine's old age, that were discovered by Johannes Divjak and first published in 1981. A group of sermons, preached in the years when Augustine was writing the *Confessions* and beginning his career as a bishop, were discovered by François Dolbeau and published in 1996. [17]

And our image of Africa itself has changed since the 1960s. Our understanding of the circumstances of the Donatist schism (with which I began my study of Augustine in 1961), has been revolutionized by the book of my friend and colleague at Princeton, Brent Shaw.[18] We no longer see Augustine's Africa through his eyes alone. He has become a figure in a landscape that is larger than himself. And, somewhat to our surprise, we find that this does not in any way diminish him. His splendid idiosyncrasy and Independence of mind stands out all the more clearly because he can now be compared with so many of his contemporaries in East and West. This was certainly what I discovered when I approached his notions of sexuality in my book on The *Body and Society*. [19]

8. The figure of 'holy men' in Late Antiquity still derives from his work. How can we understand the role of this '*vir sanctus*' among the nascent Christian communities of the late Roman era and the early Byzantine period? Did they have the same role for different regions? Did they affect only Christianity?

PB: For me, my research on the "holy man" was a turning point in my discovery of the Christian East. It coincided with the beginning of a significant re-evaluation of the social conditions of the Eastern Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries. This was due in large part to what has been called the "archaeological revolution". This revolution has challenged many of the stereotypes on which conventional outline histories of the late Roman empire had been based. Archaeologists had begun to discover a landscape. It was up to me to try to find a place for the holy men of Syria as figures in this landscape.

[17] BROWN, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography. New Edition with an Epilogue.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, p.442-443 and p.462-473.

[18] SHAW, Brent. *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

[19] BROWN, Peter. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: University of Columbia Press, 1988; reprinted as *The Body and Society: Twentieth Anniversary Edition.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, p.387-427.

It was a very different landscape from what had previously been assumed. Archaeological surveys of the countryside outside Antioch – the Limestone Massif, still known after its hero as the Djebel Semcan (Symeon's Mountain) -- where Symeon Stylites (396-459) had been active, challenged the notion that the countryside was occupied by a uniformly impoverished and oppressed peasantry. Far from it: this was not a society of broken-backed serfs. It was a new society of upwardly mobile and intensely competitive villagers.

Little could I have guessed that the splendid monograph of Georges Tchalenko, *Les villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord,* which appeared in 1953 and excited me so greatly,[20] was only the first trickle of a veritable dam-burst of excavations and regional surveys in Syria, Israel and Jordan. These have revealed an entirely unexpected agrarian boom. In the words of Michael Decker,

Rarely, if ever, in the history of the pre-industrial Mediterranean have levels of agrarian development, intensity of settlement, and a combination of security, ease of communication and monetarization coalesced than they do in the late antique East.[21]

Such impressive scholarly gains make the recent eruption of violence in the Middle East tragic, and the deliberate destruction of cultural memory by radical groups in parts of the region, doubly obscene – an entire world, only recently discovered, has been snatched from us by violence.

Looking back, I realize that my excitement at the discovery of an entire new world of peasant villages in Syria may have led me to place the holy man in too narrow a context. Holy figures, women as well as men, were abundant throughout the Christian world; and their sanctity was not always the same as those of the great pillar saints of Syria. Just as Christianity itself now appears as a diffuse galaxy, containing many versions of Christian life and practice, so Christian sanctity is a language of many distinct dialects. In a recent book, *Treasure in Heaven,* I have tried to do justice to this diversity in a comparative study of the holy men of Syria with the monks of Egypt. Each represented a distinct "dialect" of the holy summed up in different attitudes to society, to the human person, and to basic themes of human existence, such as work, poverty and wealth. [22]

[20] TCHALENKO, Georges.*Les villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord.*Paris: Institut français de Beyrouth, 1953.

[21] DECKER, Michael. *"Tilling the Hateful Earth." Agricultural Production and Trade in the Late Antique East.* Oxford University Press, 2009, p.250.

[22] BROWN, Peter. *Treasure in Heaven. The Holy Poor in Early Christianity.* Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016, p.51-118.

9. In this year - 2021 - his book "The World of Late Antiquity" celebrates 50 years since its appearance (1971). You are considered to be the one who effectively projected the concept of *Late Antiquity* among historians, transforming a whole perspective of history and historiography studies. What is Late Antiquity?

PB: As you can imagine, I look back on the publication of *The World of Late Antiquity* as a happy moment. Its publication represented the realization of my wish to speak clearly and intelligibly to the general public on a newly-discovered theme. Thames and Hudson were a press better known for their publications in art history than for academic monographs. This enabled me to write a text in which visual evidence for what I was proposing was to hand on every page. It was the equivalent of a power-point lecture on the fate of the classical tradition over half a millennium.

Just because of these qualities, the book has been held to sum up an entire field of study – to bring it into existence, as it were, simply through its challenging title. But, of course, "Late Antiquity" was more than a title. *The World of Late Antiquity* summed up the discoveries of an entire field of scholarship, pursued at different rhythms in different places. And this field has continued to debate the meaning of Late Antiquity among themselves– how long was the period? How wide was the reach of this particular cultural mutation? Did I over-extend it, both geographically and chronologically by including Iran and the early Islamic world? [23]

I trust that, over the years, I have made plain my own reasons for preferring a wide definition of the field. Many of my reasons are practical and linked to a consideration of the educational systems of the Americas and of Europe. These systems impose boundaries and make distinctions that are often wittingly or unwittingly ideologically driven, and which should, therefore, be challenged. Should we be content always to speak of the end of the Roman Empire in the West as a catastrophe brought about by barbarians which interest us only as destroyers, as most of us are accustomed to do? Can we close our text-books at 410AD? In which case we effectively exclude the next five hundred years of the history of Europe.

Looking outside Europe, can we afford to limit knowledge of Islam only to experts in Departments of Near Eastern Studies? The progress of Syriac studies has shown that Islam itself was formed through constant debate with populations who had continued a culture deeply rooted in the late antique world – as has been shown by Jack Tannous in his recent book, *The Making of the*

[23] LIZZI TESTA, Rita (ed.). *Late Antiquity in Contemporary Debate*. Cambridge: Scholars Publishing, 2017.

Medieval Middle East[24]. Such a book could not have been written twenty years ago. This and many other studies have sailed on the wind of an expansive notion of late antiquity which has lowered long-established barriers between academic departments all over the learned world. To opt for what is now called "A Shorter Late Antiquity" which ended at around 630AD has much to commend itself to ancient historians. But it would close down on the opportunities opened up by a more generous definition of the period.

10. By denying the idea of 'crisis' or 'decadence' in the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, you demonstrate the existence of a living and multiform world, where you can actually glimpse an intense process of "*transformations*" and "*continuities*", which can translate the true genesis of Europe. In what sense can we talk about continuities?

PB: One must remember that debates on continuity are nothing new. They were a regular feature in the study of Western Europe in the early part of the twentieth century. What the Germans called the *Kontinuitäts problem* was hotly contested, as it affected the balance between the Roman and the Germanic basis of the institutions of early medieval Europe. It mattered greatly to Frenchmen and to Germans as to whether institutions associated with feudal Europe – such as dependence on a lord --- had first appeared among the great landowners of Late Roman Gaul or whether they had been brought to France by triumphant war bands from across the Rhine.

In this sense, Henri Pirenne's *Mahomet et Charlemagne* already sketched out the idea of a long-lasting Late Antiquity in the West, that was brought to an end only by the Muslim invasions of the seventh century. [25] In many ways, the discovery of along late antiquity in the East has raised much the same problems of continuity and discontinuity as those raised, in earlier decades, by the critics of Pirenne.

[24] TANNOUS, Jack. *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018.

[25] PIRENNE, Henri.*Mohammed and Charlemagne*.(trans. B. Miall). London: George Allen and Unwin, 1939; see BROWN, Peter. *Mohammed and Charlemagne* by Henri Pirenne, *Daedalus* 103, 1974, p.25-33, now in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*.Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p.66- 79. See now Bonnie Effros, The Enduring Attraction of the Pirenne Thesis, *Speculum* 92, 2017, p.184-208.

11. Historians, in general, tend to give excessive significance to chronological milestones, often projecting them as elements capable of translating historical moments and phenomena unfolded in certain geographical spaces. However, one of the biggest criticisms and, at the same time, difficulties that the concept of 'Late Antiquity' presents is precisely the problem of periodization. Is it possible to circumscribe it within a defined chronology? When does it 'start' and when does it 'end'?

PB: I think I have answered this sufficiently. For researchers, periodization is simply a convenient way of organizing a perception of a general concordance of traits that enable us to say that such and such a phenomenon is "late antique". It works best at the center of the period when these traits converge. The beginning and the end of the period are usually more open to debate. But for teachers and administrators beginnings and ends are expected to be sharp and clear. Hence the constant danger of the exclusion of large and fruitful periods of history through the inertia of the syllabi attached to major examinations and through the unwillingness of departments to reach beyond their own specialty. For this reason, "Late Antiquity", though a challenging phrase, will always have to be fought for, on the ground, in the corridors of schools, universities and learned institutes.

12. With the advent of the '*problem-history*' brought up by Annales historians - since the first generations - there was a very close approximation of History with other fields of knowledge. In this sense also the need to think of historical time as an element in *longue-durée*. The Late Antiquity is not indifferent to such processes. How do you evaluate the possible interdisciplinary approaches and the effects of the long duration for this area of study?

PB: My own experience of this matter is that I came to owe an immense amount to the work of Fernand Braudel. It was Braudel rather than Pirenne who moved the Mediterranean to the center of much of my work. It was also Braudel who made me aware of the relations between the Mediterranean and the non-Mediterranean not only in the Latin West but in the Middle East. I traveled twice to Iran (in 1974 and 1976) very much in the spirit of Braudel, not only to see the monuments of the Sasanian Empire, but to view the landscapes that imposed their own mute logic on the working of the Sasanian polity. In that wide land, the relations between mountain and plain, desert and oasis, Mediterranean and Iranian plateau, were reminders of a *longue durée* of Middle

Eastern history, compared with which the competing kingdoms of East Rome and Iran were as fragile as whirling dust.

13. In the sense of historical and historiographic approaches, is it possible to say that there was a Late Antiquity, namely, 'Roman' and another one for the 'Barbarians'?

PB: Everton I agree with your suggestion. One aspect of *The World of Late Antiquity* left me unsatisfied. My concentration on the Mediterranean and the Middle East led me to neglect the non-Mediterranean regions of the Latin West. My *Rise of Western Christendom* was, in many ways, an attempt to redress this imbalance. But I do not think that the story of early medieval Europe can be seen as an alternative, entirely separate Late Antiquity for the barbarians alone. Rather, the excitement of the period lies in the remarkable manner in which Romans and barbarians alike strove to create, after the Fall of Rome, what Hervé Inglebert has called *une antiquité tardive post-romaine*, aspects of which eventually reached as far north as my native Ireland.[26]

14. Interest in studies of late antiquity has increased considerably in Brazil. In a previous conversation, you had expressed your surprise about the way Brazilian historians have dealt with the concept. Professor Peter Brown, to close this interview, I would like you to leave a message to Brazilian historians, about the vitality and obstacles that this area still presents.

PB: I have frequently had occasion to be grateful to Brazilian scholars in the field of Late Antiquity – those who I have known, such as my friend Francisco Marshall of Porto Alegre; and those whose work in the late antique field has always impressed me greatly, most notably Carlos Machado and Júlio César Magalhães de Oliveira. I have always been struck by the unusual vigor of the classical tradition in Brazil; and by the constancy of its commitment, in a troubled world, to public values rooted in the study of the great experiments in government in Greece and Rome. This commitment to the values of the classical world as relevant to the present, precisely because they cannot be taken for granted, has always given a tone of seriousness to the work of Brazilian scholars.

As a student of religion in Late Antiquity, Brazil has always been a treasure house for me. I find myself constantly challenged and instructed by the sheer variety and creativity of the religious experience of Brazil in recent times. In the early 1960s, when working on the movement of protest

[26] INGLEBERT, Hervé. *Histoire de la civilisation romaine.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005, p.483

associated with the Donatist Church in Augustine's Africa, I remember that I was greatly impressed by reading the recent English translation of *Os Sertões,* the masterpiece of Euclides da Cunha.[27] When I read it again, in 1996, in preparation for my only visit to Brazil, I realized that the gripping portrait of Antonio Conselheiro, the charismatic leader of the rebellion, had much in common with the profile of the holy man that I had studied in late antique Syria.

In the same way, I was greatly helped in my approach to the world of the New Testament and the Dead Sea Scrolls, when writing the early chapters of *The Body and Society,* by the work of Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz on comparable messianic movements in Brazil and elsewhere.[28] Studies of this kind have taught me that themes that are almost too well known to scholars of Europe and the Middle East regain a new freshness when seen from across the Atlantic and compared with the vibrant social and religious experience of Brazil.

This is not mere curiosity, an interest in the exotic. It seems to me that to study and compare the experiences of two very different worlds – modern Brasil and the World of Late Antiquity – is part of a more profound enterprise. That enterprise is the effort to grasp the strangeness of the past – to take the full measure of its **difference** from the present, so as to come to that sense of the unexpected, of the *inédito*, which lies at the heart of all true scholarship, just as it lies at the heart of all true respect for the human person. Let me end by citing a poem by Mario Quintana, which struck me when I visited his native city of Porto Alegre as the guest of Francisco Marshall in 1996:

Do Inédito

> E quando, morto de mesmice, tevier a nostalgia de climas e costumes exóticos, de jornais impressos em misteriosos caracteres, de curiosas beberagens, de roupas de estranho corte e colorido, lembra-te que para alguém nós somos os antípodas: um remoto, inacreditável povo do outro lado do mundo, quase do outro lado da vida – um agente de se ficar olhando, olhando, pasmado... Nós, os antípodas, somos assim.

Mario Quintana, *Sapato Florido* (Porto Alegre: UFRGS, 1994):25.

May the study of the world of Late Antiquity, in its superabundant energies and unusual diversity, continue to give us that sense of wonder and those moments of complete surprise, that go with any truly fruitful intellectual endeavor.

[27] CUNHA, Euclides da. *Rebellion in the Backlands.*Chicago University Press, 1957.

[28] PEREIRA DE QUEIROZ, Maria Isaura.*O messianismo no Brasil e no mundo.*São Paulo: Alfa-Omega, 1977.