

Nikki K. Rollason: *Gifts of Clothing in Late Antique Literature*. London/New York: Routledge 2016. VIII, 203 pp., 3 ill. £ 115.00. ISBN: 978-1-4724-3573-6.

This book aims to address a gap in scholarship by examining the intersection of two fields of study that have themselves received ample attention in classical scholarship: gifts and clothing. Rollason specifies the object of her study in her introduction (1–21; each chapter, with exception of the conclusion, ends with its notes) as the representation of gifts of three types of clothing – the *trabea*, the *chlamys*, and the *pallium* (rightfully leaving these words untranslated) – by (elite) men in late antique literature, represented by “a range of authors from the late 300s to the sixth century” (15). Gifts of clothing, rather than of other objects, provide a particularly promising subject of study for this period, Rollason argues, since both (the representation of) clothing and gifts negotiate authority, which, indeed, frequently had to be (re)negotiated by different interest groups in late antique society. She builds on the premise that clothing, in forming a unity made up of disparate threads, “can be viewed [...] as a representation of society, made up of different and distinct components, but whose members must bind and tie themselves to each other correctly in order to maintain the overall cohesion and thus the continuation of society in which they live” (8). In a sort of *mise en abyme*, a piece of cloth as object of a social transaction can represent the very harmony that the donor aims to achieve by giving it to someone, for the action of giving in Roman society always established a certain hierarchical order between the parties involved. One might, indeed, wonder whether textiles were unique as a material to symbolize this societal *concordia discors* (as David Woods does in his review in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2017.07.23), and whether this metaphor was so universally pervasive as Rollason seems to claim. Nevertheless, Rollason’s choice of subject proves fruitful in the stimulating discussions she offers throughout her work.

Before she arrives at the main topic of her book, discussed in chapters 2–4, Rollason in her first chapter (22–54) provides a historical overview of her theme, gifts of clothing, in Greek and Latin literature from Homer to Late Antiquity. This overview is followed by a case study of the subject in Martial’s epigrams (Rollason uses this format, an overview followed by a case study, throughout chapters 1–4). The chapter succeeds very well in pointing out several continuities in the literary tradition that remained relevant in the

late antique discourse about gifts of clothing – later chapters frequently refer to observations made in this first chapter. Rollason’s analyses in her diachronic overview are brief but astute and always relevant for her main purpose. However, her relatively long discussion of gifts of clothing in Martial’s poems (accounting for 9 out of the chapter’s total 27 pages, excluding the notes at the end) sometimes appears to be included to respond to scholarship on Martial and social interactions in the Early Empire rather than to support her main thesis. As the passages she discusses in her overview can appear somewhat cherry-picked to anticipate her discussion of gifts of clothing in late antique literature, a (problematizing) account of the selection and evaluation of different types of sources at this point could have been more useful than the case study. A genre which Rollason does not discuss, for example, is Latin epic; she only briefly refers to “works influenced by Homeric epic” (49 n. 21), including the *Aeneid*. Perhaps she has left epic out because it does not necessarily reflect social practices of the age in which it was written, although she acknowledges for the *Historia Augusta* that “even if fictitious, [it] remain[s] of value because [it] can be seen as reflecting the use of dress as a literary tool in the period in which it was written” (47). Even if it does not offer this reflection, Latin epic was certainly important for the late antique (Latin) literary tradition and could therefore have merited some attention, for Rollason later considers works by Ausonius and Claudian. As it is, however, Rollason does not offer a clue as to her selection criteria.

Turning her attention to Late Antiquity, Rollason sets off with a fine chapter (55–88) that places the gifts of clothing within the unique diplomatic landscape of Late Antiquity, where arms were not (anymore) the empire’s most effective or even preferred means to secure peace. An impressive range of sources are reviewed, including familiar names (at least to the scholar of ‘Roman’ Late Antiquity) such as Priscus, Procopius and Malalas as well as the lesser-studied Armenian authors Agathangelos, Faustus Buzandats’i and Moses Khorenats’i. In all of these texts, garments were understood to have unique diplomatic qualities as symbols of peace, expressions of wealth and power, and vehicles of (Roman) civilization. Rollason takes into account interactions with different foreign powers, most notably Attila, the Sassanid Empire, and the buffer states of Armenia and Lazica (her case study in this chapter treats the apparel of the Lazican king Tzath). Among her most striking and convincing points is the observation that the Romans did not give (clothing made of) silk – normally one of the most precious materials used

in diplomatic exchanges – to the Persians. As the Romans imported their silk from Persia (at least up to the middle of the 6th century, when silk production within the empire started), using it as a diplomatic present to the Persians would equal bringing owls to Athens. Only at the beginning and end of this chapter have I found two minor flaws. The ‘diplomatic’ passage about weaving from the *Lysistrata* that introduces the chapter’s topic seems out of place, as the passage is highly ironic and compares the dissolving of a cloth rather than its production to the process of peace making. At the end, Rollason seems to overstate the importance of diplomatic gifts of clothing by claiming that “clothing gifts played a vital role in the empire’s continued survival” (80). For all the importance of clothing gifts in diplomacy, such gifts would not have been much use, it seems to me, without at least the appearance of continued Roman military superiority. Otherwise, why did clothing not save the Western Roman Empire (which is, overall, rather absent in this chapter)?

Chapter 3 (89–128) treats figural decorations on clothing, particularly consular *trabae* – a type of garment typically associated with the late antique consulate that continues to escape exact identification. The chapter builds up to the case study, which concerns the *trabea* that Ausonius receives from Emperor Gratian upon his becoming consul in 379, as he describes it in his panegyric thanksgiving speech, the *Gratiarum Actio*. As it is, Ausonius’ *trabea* happens to be the only consular garment in the historical record of Late Antiquity of which we can be fairly certain that it existed, who gave it to whom, and what was displayed on it. In preparing the ground for her case study, Rollason does a good job in drawing conclusions from the scarce sources that tell us something about figurally decorated garments and/or consular clothing, most importantly four consular diptychs (a pity that the book includes illustrations of only two of them!) and two ekphrastic passages from poems by Claudian and Sidonius. With due care of the particular modes of interpretation these different sources require she convincingly argues that the iconography of *trabae* tended to convey messages of dynastic harmony within the imperial or the consular families, or both. This is also an important aspect in her case study, which includes some discussion of the historical circumstances within which Gratian’s gift to Ausonius has to be placed. She offers valuable conclusions about the interplay between the *trabea* and Ausonius’ literary production, which enhances the legitimacy and authority of both donor and recipient. Unique as Ausonius’ case may be,

Rollason's interpretation offers a promising model for further studies on interaction between visual objects and literature in ekphrastic passages of late antique panegyric texts.

In her fourth and final full chapter (129–169), Rollason discusses transactions of clothing in late antique Christian literature. This requires her to examine fields where clothing gifts were involved that are rather different from the (classical) contexts in which she has considered them thus far. The dense chapter successfully provides a stimulating overview of the topic, considering both universal, day-to-day practices reflected in Christian literature as well as unique cases where single pieces of clothing are exchanged between clerical protagonists. She succinctly though with clarity addresses the former topic, which concerns clothing (gifts) in Christian charity, relics, and conversion; an achievement not to be underestimated given the fact that these are rather encompassing and well-studied fields. The latter topic, however, provides more opportunity for original interpretation and new observations, which Rollason thankfully and impressively takes. In her discussion of gifts of clothing in particular cases, mostly described in hagiographies, Rollason shows that the discourse of transferring and expressing authority, familiar from previous chapters, also applied to clothing gifts between clerics. She discusses a range of cases, both in the eastern and the western parts of the Empire at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century, which highlight religious abuse of clothing, tensions between Church hierarchy and monasticism, and the imposition of orthodoxy by bestowing religious garments. Her last case study shows the crucial role Antony's *himation* or *pallium* played in two hagiographical texts (Athanasius' *Vita Antonii* and Jerome's *Vita Pauli primi eremita*) to fashion the transfer of authority over the monastic movement that Antony held. In accordance with their respective agendas, the two authors present different persons as inheritors of Antony's clothing, thus differently identifying the successor to Antony's saintly authority (Athanasius himself in the former, Paul the Hermit in the latter case). She does not examine other late antique hagiographies that present meaningful transmissions of clothing from one holy man to another, which could have contributed further to her argument. In the anonymous *Life of Daniel the Stylite*, for example, the eponymous saint inherits the leather tunic (a *dermokoukoulon*, a word that does not occur in Rollason's book) of his guide and

predecessor Simeon the Stylite.¹ Simeon actually wanted to be buried in his *dermokoukoulon*, which, according to the Syriac version of the *Life*, was exactly what happened. In the Greek life, however, it is brought to Constantinople, perhaps originally with the idea to present it to the emperor.² With such differing claims to the holy man's clothing, the passage connects very well with Rollason's observations. That she has not included such further cases, perhaps merely because they concern other types of clothing than her *chlamys*, *trabea* or *pallium*, is the only criticism I will raise against this otherwise excellent chapter. In any case, it successfully offers us tools with which to interpret further cases.

On a different level, Rollason's book also succeeds in drawing general conclusions, "drawing the threads together", as the concluding chapter (170–178) is titled – one of several puns the book contains that refers (very classically) to its own production through metaphors of textile – from what, at first sight, might appear as a selection of separate, sometimes unrelated case studies that all happen to have something to do with sartorial presents. However, as her conclusion neatly summarizes, Rollason detects several red threads about gifts of clothing in late antique literature that run through the different cases she examines. Particularly persuasive is her observation that gifted clothing generally functioned as a symbol of authority, either projected by or transferred from the donor to the recipient. Rollason's analyses for how this works within different late antique contexts are generally the strongest parts of her work. Building on this observation, she suggests that the frequent mention of clothing gifts across different late antique literary genres reflects concerns about structuring – rather than dissolving, as sometimes happened in earlier periods – authority that were particular to the Roman late antique society. At the risk of presenting a circular argument (cf. Rollason's claim in her introduction that Late Antiquity is a promising era

1 Vita Danielis Stylitae 22. The authoritative edition of the text remains the one by H. Delehay: AB 32, 1913, 121–229. An English translation (with introduction and notes) of this text is available in E. Dawes and N. H. Baynes: Three Byzantine Saints: Contemporary Biographies Translated from the Greek. London 1948, 1–84. Because of this transaction, the same chapter explicitly likens Simeon and Daniel to Elijah and Elisha – the Biblical example *par excellence* for passing on spiritual authority through a transfer of clothing, as Rollason shows (145–148; the illustration on the book's front cover is a detail from a late antique wall hanging depicting Elijah and Elisha).

2 Dawes and Baynes: Three Byzantine Saints, n. to "leather tunic" (75).

for her topic), this seems a plausible conclusion. However, the related claim that “[t]he process of [the] manufacture [of clothing] [...] provided tools for vocalizing ideas about social cohesion, for it was an item worn by all and made by the combination of disparate elements into a harmonious whole” (170) remains unconvincing. To make this claim acceptable (and, by extension, Rollason’s suggestion that clothing itself, by association with its production, generally functioned as a metaphor for social cohesion), she should have included more discussion of passages that actually present the production of clothing precisely as symbolizing such. In the end, this one unproven claim, the relatively few editorial mistakes,³ and the parsimony as regards the use of illustrations (in color) do not weigh up against the many stimulating discussions and valuable insights this book has to offer. It holds much that is of interest to students of late antique literature and society as well as those interested in the history of clothing more in general.

- 3 26: “one of presents” › “one of **the** presents”; 48 n. 8: verse ends in Greek not indicated; 59 and 82, n. 25: δῶρα σύνθητες › δῶρα συνήθη; 82, n. 33: “the Vandals” › “the Vandals”; 72: “in later the same text” › “later in the same text”; 72: “both rulers, could and did” › “both rulers could and did”; 73: “it would be natural, to assume” › “it would be natural to assume”; 79: “Roman influence over Armenia” › “Roman influence over the (king of the) Lazi”; 91: translations of first two Greek quotations are missing; 92: “seems to be have seen” › “seems to have been seen”; 99: “it also noteworthy” › “it **is** also noteworthy”; 111: “emphasis” › “emphasize”; 111: “*Gratiarum Action*” › “*Gratiarum Actio*”; 136: “was a certainly seen” › “was certainly seen”; 140: “Anatolis’ generic *vestis*, shows” › “Anatolis’ generic *vestis* shows”; 157: “a leader the orthodox church” › “a leader **of** the orthodox church”; 162, n. 68: Ὁῦτω › Ὁῦτω; 172: “their role in as real diplomatic gifts” › “their role as real diplomatic gifts”; 175: “the saints legacy” › “the **saint’s** legacy”.

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