
This is, in many respects, a very useful book. The family of the late Roman world is a well-researched topic, but there are few monograph-length studies that focus on the immediate post-Roman world (a term that Southon contends however, preferring ‘post-imperial’, to off-set moralistic ideas of decline, 18). Until now, this uneven pattern of scholarship has made especially teaching on the family in Late Antiquity (understood, following Peter Brown, as the period c. 200 to c. 700) very difficult and fragmented. Southon’s book is explicitly based on materials deriving from territories progressively finding themselves outside the Roman polity after 400, particularly law codes and ecclesiastical treatises. It contains two hugely helpful appendices that list, at a glance, both the Roman and the post-Roman evidence on key aspects of family law, making it easy to follow developments. On academic reading lists the book should therefore have pride of place next to earlier key studies, such as Geoffrey Nathan’s more Rome-focused The Family in Late Antiquity, for complementation and comparison.

The book comes in three parts, following the typical life-cycle of a family. Despite the title, there is, regrettably, no dedicated section on the impact of death on families in this period, although Southon discusses inheritance patterns throughout the book (e.g. in the case of childlessness 58–59). Instead, Southon surveys norms, customs and practices around betrothal (or ‘the creation of households’, 29), marriage, and parenthood, including of adult children, bringing the discussion full circle back to marriage arrangements for the next generation. On each of these themes, Southon gets to grips with important topics, such as the directions of property transfer upon marriage (Chapter 1.1), abortion, infanticide and exposure (Chapter 1.5), attitudes towards adultery (Chapter 2.3) or the meaning of fatherhood (Chapter 3.2). Her conclusions are not always necessarily new. For example, she largely follows Ruth Karras in arguing that the bilateral transfer of property upon betrothal, previously seen as ‘Germanic’ custom, can also be observed in the

late Roman empire, and must therefore be seen as a more ‘global’ change of
atitudes towards the value of women in this period. However, Southon has
the gift of laying out and ordering the evidence in a clear and sustained man-
ner that makes it easy to grasp what is at stake. For instance, her distinction
between ‘ante-natal and post-partum’ strategies of family planning is in-
spired, as it allows at one glance to see how much more important the latter
ones were in this period, at least to contemporary authors. Southon’s two
chapters on fatherhood (one dealing with fatherhood and property, and one
dealing with the relationships between fathers and children) are hugely im-
portant, if only because there has as yet, surprisingly, been no comparable
published treatment of the post-Roman father’s role in the family. At least
in a legal sense, the Roman family revolved around the paterfamilias and his
paternal power (patria potestas), so Southon’s study has the potential of put-
ting analysis of family structures in Late Antiquity on a new footing. Her
attention throughout to the emotional side of family relationships has to be
commended, too. She often manages to tease out the dissonance between
legal prescriptions and human behaviour, as in her investigation on the role
of a bride’s consent to marriage as described in Eucheria of Marseilles’ po-
etry, a rare instance of a female voice in this period (53–55).

Despite all this welcome and detailed attention to different aspects of the
family, Southon is less forthcoming on what they all mean, despite promis-
ing, once again in the title, that the book tackles ‘the fall of Rome’. The ob-
servant reader of this book – at least one who has some means to compare
with structures and customs of earlier Roman families which are not con-
stantly laid out here – comes away with the following impression. By the
year 700, the family was a less vertical affair, more focused on the conjugal
couple, less of a power sphere for fathers (who usually passed on some of
their property to children during their lifetime), more defined as an emo-
tional unit of parents and children, more in danger of being questioned as
the most desirable lifestyle due to the rise of celibacy and monasticism, and
hence, overall, perhaps more recognisable to the modern family. Southon
does not consider material culture around the family (and overall, deals more
with ideas and norms than with experiences), but other studies, for example
by Guy Halsall,\(^2\) have shown that some of these aspects are visible in the

archaeological record too, especially the more horizontal structures of families who, as burial practices show, were less able to maintain identities over long periods of time. These are, to this reader, momentous changes, but Southon both underestimates their significance and does not really explain what caused them. She vehemently rejects a Germanic/Roman dichotomy (14), while pointing at the commonality with late Roman norms and customs, so is not really addressing the question of ‘the fall of Rome’. Where she does consider change, she identifies ‘Christian thought’ as its ‘driver’ (201). Dismissal of ethnic difference as an explanator for change is surely the right approach, and Christianity without doubt brought new cultural values. Yet, not all of the developments described above are just continuing from the Roman past or are necessarily ‘Christian’, or at least Southon does not always explain sufficiently why they would be. It is, for example, hard to see what the emergence of bi-lateral property transfers upon marriage has to do with Christianity, rather than with a desire to create cohesion between basic social entities in an increasingly unstable world. Sometimes one has to acknowledge that Western Europe became more fragmented in this period.

The book is overall nicely produced, but there is evidence for some odd editing practices. Apart from the blunder of the title (which raises the suspicion of a marketing department’s belief that both ‘death’ and ‘the fall of Rome’ sell), the bibliography has clearly been through a software programme that alphabetically misplaced titles and frequently reproduced them. Poor copy-editing lets down not only the reader, but the author, too.


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