Kristina Sessa: Daily Life in Late Antiquity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018. X, 250 p., 51 ill. £ 71.99. ISBN: 978-0-521-76610-4.

As regards the history of the history of daily life, it is good to realise that we are standing on the shoulders of giants. From the late nineteenth/early twentieth century on, classicists from diverse research traditions have collected data on the topic. While their interest primarily were the literary sources, they often included a good amount of inscriptional evidence, combined with other documentary sources as papyri and coins and all sorts of archaeological material, from iconography to material evidence as tools, instruments or houses.[1] It is an interesting exercise to study how sources that made it through the sieve of this scholarship were passed on in generations of handbooks and studies up to the beginning of the twenty-first century. These were often not late ancient sources, which makes that studies about daily life in this period were relatively few.[2] In practice, scholarship often had to await the attainments of digital research engines and lexicons to dig up new sources which then became standard texts in the new scholarly tradition.[3]

1 J. Marquardt: Das Privatleben der Römer. 2 vol. 2. ed. Leipzig 1879–1882 (Handbuch der römischen Alterthümer 7); L. Friedländer: Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms. In der Zeit von Augustus bis zum Ausgang der Antonine. Bearbeitet von G. Wissowa. 4 vol. 10. ed. Leipzig 1921–1923; J. Carcopino: La vie quotidienne à Rome à l'apogée de l'Empire. Paris 1939; U. E. Paoli: Vita romana. Notizie di antichità private. Firenze 1940. See also the monumental C. Daremberg/E. Saglio (eds.): Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines, d'après les textes et les monuments, contenant l'explication des termes qui se rapportent aux mœurs, aux institutions, à la réligion, et en général à la vie publique et privée des anciens. 9 vol. Paris 1877–1919 – now fully available online (URL: dagr.univ-tlse2.fr). All these books (more could have been cited) are classics, and although methods and questions have changed considerably in socio-cultural research, they still deserve to be studied.

2 Of course, we now have most useful works at our disposal. For daily life, I refer to B. Lançon: Rome dans l'Antiquité tardive. 312–604 après J.-C. Paris 1995 (La vie quotidienne. Civilisations et sociétés); R. W. Mathisen: People, Personal Expression and Social Relations in Late Antiquity. 2 vol. Ann Arbor, MI 2003; M. Maas (ed.): Readings in Late Antiquity. A Sourcebook. 2. ed. London/New York 2009 (Routledge Sourcebooks for the Ancient World); D. Boin: A Social and Cultural History in Late Antiquity. Hoboken, NJ 2018 (Wiley Blackwell Social and Cultural Histories of the Ancient World).

3 K. Harper: Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275–425. Cambridge/New York 2011; K. Harper: From Shame to Sin. The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity. Cambridge, MA/London 2013 (Revealing Antiquity 20) are

"Writing a book for a general audience requires a different voice from the one I normally use in my scholarship". Thus Kristina Sessa in her acknowledgments (IX). This is indeed a book that presumes no specific knowledge of the late ancient world. Throughout the volume, written in a very accessible style, Sessa guides her audience through literally all one would like to know about daily life in this period. Her approach is consequently didactic, while the tone never gets pedantic. Taking the reader by the hand and inviting him/her to think along with her, she first goes through all the necessary steps of an introduction (1–20): the debates on the periodisation of Late Antiquity (in this book, the period 250–600 CE is proposed), the problems and possibilities of studying daily life in the deep past (fundamental differences with modern Western society, problems with the sources, and the necessity of inferential thinking by looking at parallels from other periods). An apt overview then introduces the reader to the historical context (geopolitics, social relations and religious diversity) of the period Continuity and change thus serve as the red thread through the different chapters.

Rural life, the experience of at least eighty percent of the late Empire's inhabitants, is the subject of the first chapter (21–46). Here, there obviously is a lot of continuity to be observed: working on the land, peasant labourers, crops, cultivation, processing and livestock are all nicely explained and illustrated. On the other hand, there were some typical evolutions of Late Antiquity: the colonate and a certain economic contraction in the West that caused landholdings to become smaller and imperial estates to collapse, combined with forms of diversified farming that were more suitable to local conditions.[4]

As all chapters, the one on urban life (47–83) starts off with a case study. For this section, the changing urban landscape in the West and the East is illustrated by the cases of Brixia and Ephesus: the shift into "a new normal" was gradual, and it included ruin, reuse and renewal (53). Occupation and activities get due attention: not only the *corpora* of organised workers, but also infamous workers as prostitutes and pimps (for whom the prohibition

two outstanding examples of such research based on a thorough source through often little exploited sources.

4 For rural life in a local community of Egypt, see now also the excellent microstudy by G.R. Ruffini: Life in an Egyptian Village in Late Antiquity. Aphrodito Before and After the Islamic Conquest. Cambridge 2018.

and persecution of male prostitutes in 390 CE in the city of Rome is a clear sign of Christian influence, see 62). Entertainment in the cities gets due attention too. Baths continued to be an important element of urban life, at least in the East (p. 67 mentions an interesting experiment of comparing with modern Turkish baths as room temperatures are concerned). Despite resistance by Christian thinkers, gladiators continued to be popular up to the beginning of the fifth century, while hunting shows in the Colosseum are attested as late as 523 CE (71–72). Chariot racing and mime performances continued toattract big audiences. Especially in the western cities, where constant maintenance by the state of aqueducts and sewer systems declined, the shift to cisterns and wells became a pattern throughout the Middle Ages. Surely in the Byzantine sources, the treat of internal urban violence due to rioting is eminently present.

An historian of the ancient families myself, I particularly enjoyed the third chapter on the household (84–124), which is seasoned by telling case stories and relevant remarks on all sorts of practicalities of life, like living together with temporary household members in a crowded apartment (90). Despite efforts by both Christian thinkers and legislation, there seems to have existed a great deal of continuity for matters as marriage[5], divorce and widowhood, common-law marriage and adultery, views and practices of childhood. With Sessa, one wonders in how far the Christian exhortation for mothers to breastfeed their own children instead of relying on wetnurses, inspired by the example of the Virgin Mary, had a real impact on decisions taken in daily life (99). The same counts for the institution of slavery, for which slave markets, slave dealers taking captives in villages, severe maltreatment[6], fugitive slaves and the possibility for slaves to make a career (cf. the beautiful example of the talented young Andarchius with Gregory of Tours, mentioned on p. 100–102) seem to have been part and parcel of daily life as they were before. In the wake of studies on lived experience, housing in the widest sense gets due attention (with more evidence of substantial non-elite housing

5 On p. 91, Sessa rightly remarks that "marriage did not become a holy sacrament until the twelfth century", but she completely bypasses the thesis by K. Cooper: The Fall of the Roman Household. Cambridge/New York 2007 on the Christianisation of marriage in Late Antiquity.

6 Though I have always stressed the dark side of slavery myself, I would be hesitant to endorse Sessa's statement that: "we should assume that all slaves in the late Roman Empire were physically disciplined, if not seriously abused, at some point in their lives" (106).

for the East than for the West, where non-elites rather clustered around the estates of rich landlords): home decoration, and domestic activities as eating, sleeping, bathing, waste disposal and leisure are as much part of the experience of family life as high-brown theories and ideals by moralists or poets on the matter.[7]

Much change is at stake in the chapter on the state in everyday life (125–158), where Sessa acknowledges that "the late Roman state was hardly a distant entity in the daily lives of its inhabitants" (157) – a reference to the well-known characterization of the late Roman Empire as a coercive state. Here, we encounter very good observations on the organization of the late Roman army, with due attention to soldiers' experiences as marriage and family life, forts, the experience of warfare and practicalities of unpopular measures as billeting. The same attention to pertinent practical details shines through in Sessa's digressions on law courts (why should 'ordinary people' bother to use the court system, and what would be the experience of, say, a criminal case?) and on taxation (here, the use of enforcement by the military was an essential element). Also, the dynamic of the provisioning system (*annona*) and moving goods and people via the *cursus publicus* are aptly highlighted, though one would have expected to see at least a reference to Walter Scheidel's Orbis Project (https://orbis.stanford.edu/), by now an indispensable tool to deal with matters of geospatiality in the (late) ancient world.

"Body and mind" may sound a little vague, but it serves as the title of a chapter on health in Late Antiquity, which again is a most rewarding read (159–197). A reconstructed life story of Valeria Verecunda, who on her gravestone is identified as a female doctor (*iatromeia*) immediately introduces the readers *in medias res*.[8] Next to humoural theory, which goes back to at least the Hippocratic school, Sessa also goes into the interpretation of disease as an effect of demonic possession, an "alternative system" (164) which seems particular for Late Antiquity. Disease, plague (the Cyprian and the

7 On a sidenote, I observed some errors in the Latin terms used in this chapter: *deductio ad domum* should rather read as *deductio in domum* (92); the Latin for "lunch" is *prandium*, not *prandia* (99 and 120); while "dessert" is *mensa secunda*, not necessarily *mensae secundae* (120).

8 See now also A. Buonopane/U. Soldovieri: Medica, obstetrix, iatromea. Note in margine a un'iscrizione inedita da Puteoli. In: A. Marcone (ed.): Lavoro, lavoratori e dinamiche sociali a Roma antica. Persistenze e trasformazioni. Atti delle giornate di studio (Roma Tre, 25–26 maggio 2017). Rome 2018, 272–283.

Justinian)[9], disability and (miraculous) healing are all dealt with and illustrated by telling case stories, such as the successful insertion of a lead catheter in the penis in a case of gangrene of the genitals, as reported by John of Ephesus (172). I found the section on women's bodies particularly insightful. Sessa seems to be one of the only scholars who thought about women's sanitary protection and the securing of napkins during their meses (177 on *phulakia* – on p. 195 male underwear is wrongly called *subilgaculum* instead of *subligaculum*). Hospitals are a typically late ancient evolution too, intertwined with Christian concepts of charity.[10] The discussions on schooling/education and on sexuality and control of one's own body are useful as are all other sections in the book, though I feel that for both aspects more could and should have been said about the specific Christian impact on the matter.[11]

Lived religion prominently comes to the fore in the last chapter on religion in daily life (198–226). Rather than on extraordinary lives of religious elites and excesses of asceticism (222–225), the focus is on rites, traditions and the impact of public religious life on the everyday, on sacred spaces and buildings, cemeteries, feasts and festivals, and on magic of primarily both pagans and Christians, but also to a lesser extent Jews and Manicheans.[12] The book is rounded of by an appendix on late Roman time and money, concise but useful endnotes (each chapter has a separate bibliography as a guide to further reading), and an excellent index which also pays attention to the rich information supplied under the over fifty beautiful and functional illustrations.

9 See now also K. Harper: The Fate of Rome. Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire. Princeton, NJ/Oxford 2017 (The Princeton History of the Ancient World), for the Cyprian plague to be read with the reconsiderations by S. R. Huebner: The "Plague of Cyprian": A Revised View of the Origin and Spread of a 3rd-c. CE Pandemic. In: JRA 2021 [online], 24 p.

10 See now also C. Laes: Mental Hospitals in Pre-Modern Society. Antiquity, Byzantium, Western Europe, and Islam. Some Reconsiderations. In: J. Rantala (ed.): Gender, Memory, and Identity in the Roman World. Amsterdam 2019 (Social Worlds of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages 2), 301–324.

11 K. Harper: From Shame to Sin. The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity. Cambridge, MA/London 2013 (Revealing Antiquity 20) is strangely overlooked.

12 See now also H. Sivan: Jewish Childhood in the Roman World. Cambridge 2018, who pays due attention to lived religion and everyday life experience in general.

This superb monograph is mainly targeted at undergraduate students and general readers, but it would do injustice to the work to restrict it to this audience. In fact, it is so wonderfully rich that it deserves to be read also by specialists in the field, and surely by those who want to integrate Late Antiquity more into their teaching. Kristina Sessa is to be praised for such a major achievement, and undoubtedly her path will be followed, both in well informed popular books for a larger audience and in more detailed studies which use anthropological parallels to further explore the fascinating world of daily life in (Late) Antiquity, for which much still is to be discovered.[13]

13 See about twenty chapters in C. Laes/V. Vuolanto (eds.): Children and Everyday Life in the Roman and Late Antique World. London/New York 2017 or the popular little volume by P. Matyszak: 24 Hours in Ancient Rome. A Day in the Life of the People Who Lived There. London 2017. For a monograph that fully engages with papyrology, archaeology and anthropology, next to the better-known literary sources, see A.L. Boozer: At Home in Roman Egypt. A Social Archaeology. Cambridge 2021. For the Greek East in Late Antiquity and the Byzantine Middle Ages, see O.-M. Cojocaru: Byzantine Childhood. Representations and Experiences of Children in Middle Byzantine Society. London/New York 2021 (Routledge Research in Byzantine Studies).

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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