Anna M. Sitz: Pagan Inscriptions, Christian Viewers. The Afterlives of Temples and Their Texts in the Late Antique Eastern Mediterranean. New York: Oxford University Press 2023 (Cultures of Reading in the Ancient Mediterranean). XXVIII, 321 p., 66 ill., 2 maps. £ 94.00/ $ 125.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-766643-2.

In assessments of the changes wrought by Christianity in Mediterranean society in Late Antiquity, those associated with the transformation of urban spaces have long held a place of central, conceptual importance. Peter Brown's famous declaration that he "wished he had been one of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus" so that he might "enter into their surprise" in witnessing the transformations between the third century and the fifth evoked a legend, best known from a Latin version by Gregory of Tours (though accounts in a range of other languages are known), in which physical changes in urban fabric exemplified the eclipse of paganism by Christianity: it is the sight of a cross over the city gate of Ephesus that first hints to one of the Sleepers, Malchus, the new ascendancy of his formerly persecuted Christian faith.[1] Yet the advent of Christianity not only involved the grafting onto ancient cityscapes of elements associated with the faith, such as crosses in public places, as in the legend, but most especially church buildings; in addition to such new elements, older ones fell into decay and were sometimes eradicated. A classic text on this matter is Mark the Deacon's Life of Porphyry of Gaza, which presents the bishop embarking on a campaign of deliberate destruction of the pagan temples in his diocese. But as recent analysis has shown, Mark's account is a rhetorical construct, a very literary retelling designed for consumption by audiences far beyond the city of Gaza, for whom the realities of local topographical history mattered less than an inspiring narrative of a heroic bishop purging his territory of every physical vestige of the worship of demons.[2]

One area where the practicalities of erasure, albeit secular rather than religious, have been studied extensively (because the nature of the evidence permits it) is epigraphy. Numerous inscriptions survive that show the chiselling out of names of individuals – usually emperors, but also their ministers – whose reputations were condemned by posterity (and usually a very immediate posterity at that). The subtlety with which such erasures were undertaken in Late Antiquity (as well as in other periods of the ancient world) has attracted much attention in recent decades, with particular emphasis on the political manifestations of the practice usually described (not unproblematically) by the modern coinage of *damnatio memoriae* (see pp. 217–233).[3] Such condemnations involved not just the erasure of names on monuments, but also the suppression of legal enactments and, of course, the removal of images. The political programmes underpinning such erasures could sometimes have unintended consequences: Lactantius reports that when Constantine ordered images of Maximian thrown down, this resulted in the simultaneous destruction of images of Diocletian, with whom he was frequently paired in imperial icons.[4] Yet we should be wary of the notion that such erasures were pursued with universal and systematic enthusiasm: in many places, images and names remained in situ. As a result, civic spaces throughout the late antique world will have presented assemblages not just of the images and names of legitimate rulers and their officials, but also of those who were condemned but somehow escaped erasure, as well as extensive galleries of much earlier rulers.

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[1] P. Brown: The Making of Late Antiquity. Cambridge, MA 1978 (Carl Newell Jackson Lectures), p. 1.

[2] See now Mark the Deacon: Life of Porphyry of Gaza. Translated with Introduction and Commentary by J. Childers, C. Rapp, and Mi. Whitby. Liverpool 2025 (Translated Texts for Historians 89).

Anna M. Sitz's new study applies such approaches to the question of temples in the late antique East. Her concern is chiefly with the inscribed parts of temples and sanctuaries, and occasionally other public spaces, and how these were regarded in Late Antiquity. She rightly posits that the epigraphic landscapes of late antique cities presented a historical palimpsest: new inscriptions sat side-by-side with older ones. Moreover, these older inscriptions could sometimes be reinscribed at later dates. Sitz's discussion begins (pp. 1–3) with a suggestive discussion of the reinscribing some time in the fourth or fifth century CE of an epigram by the early classical lyric poet Simonides of Keos at Megara. While the epigram is usually studied in the context of its composition c. 479 BCE, its later reinscription invites us to consider other contexts in which the text might be understood. The act of recarving the text was undertaken by an ἀρχιερεύς Helladios. Simonides' text itself refers to the losses of Megarians in the series of confrontations during Xerxes' invasion of Greece in 480–479 BCE and concludes with a remark that down to the present the city had consecrated a bull.[5] The text and its reinscription prompts all manner of questions, not least what significance should be attached to the consecration of a bull. Sitz sees the text as manifesting a local response to creeping Christianisation. She also rightly points out that the very act of recarving the text shows that it was still comprehensible nearly a millennium after its composition. It is the meaning of such texts and responses to them that Sitz explores in this study.

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[3] E. g. C. W. Hedrick Jr.: History and Silence. Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity. Austin, TX 2000; H. I. Flower: The Art of Forgetting. Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture. Chapel Hill, NC 2006 (Studies in the History of Greece and Rome); and, more generally, K. Boers/B. Grose/R. Usherwood/G. Walker (eds): Erasures in Late Antiquity. Budapest 2024 (Sylloge. Library of Late Antique and Byzantine Studies).

[4] Lact. mort. pers. 42.1.

An introductory chapter 1 ("Afterlives of Inscriptions", pp. 1–27), leading on from the account of the Simonides epigram, establishes the parameters for what follows. In line with much recent scholarship, Sitz rightly highlights that accounts of deliberate destruction of pagan sanctuaries commonly found in early Christian narratives need to be treated with caution: they are rhetorically sophisticated works that serve a polemical purpose, chiefly to establish the sacred credentials of the Christian leaders whose activities are being described. She also offers sensitive (if brief) discussion of the presence and function of inscribed texts in sanctuaries and considers what frameworks of literacy we need to bear in mind when thinking about how late antique viewers looked at inscriptions.

Chapter 2 ("The Use of Real or Imagined Inscriptions in Late Antique Literature", pp. 28–68) examines the role of inscriptions in literary texts, particularly in terms of quotation in a range of works from historiography to travel literature to grammatical treatises and compilation into collections such as the *Anthologia Palatina*. The cumulative effect is to demonstrate compellingly that older inscriptions were fully comprehensible to later readers, even if they sometimes misinterpreted them. This also explains the existence of 'fake' inscriptions, such as the oracle found in the Tübingen Theosophy that predicts that the temple of Apollo at Kyzikos will in time be rededicated to the Virgin Mary. Moreover, the text of real inscriptions could be manipulated to suit Christian needs, as in the famous (or infamous) case of a set of epitaphs from Hierapolis in Phrygia Salutaris that were reworked in Late Antiquity to provide the raw materials for an epitaph for the subject of the fourth- or fifth-century Life of Abercius (pp. 52–64).[6]

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[5] In addition to the references cited by Sitz ad loc., see also Simonides: Epigrammata XVII. In: D. A. Campbell (ed. and trans.): Greek Lyric. Vol. 3: Stesichorus, Ibycus, Simonides, and Others. Cambridge, MA/London 1991 (Loeb Classical Library 476), pp. 532–535.

Chapter 3 ("Preservation: Tolerating Temples and Their Texts", pp. 69–146) examines the preservation of ancient inscriptions (and sometimes iconography) on temple buildings in new Christian contexts across a range of sites. A number of possible explanations are offered for their continued existence: at Ephesus, the facade of the so-called temple of Hadrian was retained (although the name of the local goddess Artemis had disappeared, perhaps through accidental damage) as a backdrop for the display of imperial statues; at Priene, the temple of Athena Polias was preserved, perhaps even with various cult statues on display, even in a damaged state after a fire (the cause of which cannot be ascertained) as a sort of museum encapsulating the city's history. Not far from Priene, at Mylasa a temple of Augustus and Roma (now lost but well-recorded by early modern visitors) seems to have taken on a secular function for the public display of imperial documents inscribed onto the western wall of the temple's podium in the fifth century. A similar habit can be discerned in the inscription of a tax register on the wall of the temple of Zeus Sosipolis at Magnesia on the Maeander at some time in the fourth century. At times the evidence is opaque and defies easy analysis: such is the case with dense clusters of Christian graffiti on the Altar of the Chians at Delphi, which seemingly sat side-by-side quite comfortably with epigraphic records of the functioning of the sanctuary stretching back over centuries. At Ancyra, where the temple of Augustus and Roma is famously inscribed with the Latin and Greek text of Augustus' *Res Gestae*, Sitz argues that the evidence does not permit any firm conclusion as to the late antique fate of the building, even if there is good reason to suspect that the district surrounding the temple remained vibrant throughout Late Antiquity (p. 101). There are hints – but no more than that – that the text of the *Res Gestae* was itself read in this period and perhaps as late as the tenth century (pp. 106–109). At Aizanoi a temple of Zeus was certainly converted into a church, but the date of the conversion is impossible to ascertain and may be middle Byzantine rather than late antique; throughout Late Antiquity, therefore, inscriptions honouring earlier emperors remained visible to the city’s inhabitants and may have inculcated a sense of local pride in the city’s imperial connections. At Palmyra, pre-existing inscriptions (many of them bilingual in Greek and Aramaic) remained visible at the temple of Bel even after its renovation as a church. Local historical civic pride is again posited as a cause (p. 121). Elsewhere, at Sardis and Lagina in Caria, churches rose next to temples that might have been perfectly identifiable as pagan shrines, and where no clear evidence of deliberate destruction has been found. Some Egyptian examples are also adduced here to show that while Coptic fathers like Shenoute of Atripe might have denounced hieroglyphic inscriptions as sources of demonic danger, many churches and monastic centres seem to have been built alongside temples where such inscriptions (often elaborately painted) remained visible.[7] The still identifiable masons’ marks on the wall of the sanctuary of Apollo at Didyma may have inspired the magical symbols found in a Christian inscription in the theatre at nearby Miletus.

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[6] On this inscription, I note now A. Blank: Die Grabinschrift des Aberkios. Ein Kommentar. Regensburg 2023 (non vidi).

Some inscriptions, however, did not remain in their original locations but were moved to other contexts, including within churches. The meanings of such spoliation are explored in chapter 4 (“Spoliation: Integrating and Scrambling Inscriptions”, pp. 147–201), which takes its lead from the contentious account in Mark’s Life of Porphyry that the integration of architectural members from temples into church buildings was intended as a source of humiliation for defeated paganism. The ensuing discussion reaffirms the suspicion that Mark’s account should not be taken at face value. Equally, however, Sitz challenges the assumption that such stones were used merely out of pragmatic concerns, because they provided convenient stores of building material; she suggests instead, through another sequence of case studies, that inscribed stones were often used in ways that reflect sensitivity to the texts they bore and were placed so that the texts might be read. A striking example is provided by the fifth- or sixth-century Basilica E at Sagalassos, where the inscribed architrave of the temple of Apollo Klarios was reused in architraves spanning colonnades within the church (their precise location is debated: pp. 168–171); Sitz posits that the inscription, albeit in “scrambled” form, might even have been legible by those in the nave of the church, although its precise “meaning” remains a subject for debate. The well-documented case of the conversion of the temple of Aphrodite at Aphrodisias into a church around 500 is perhaps even more remarkable, in that inscribed dedications from the original temple were left in situ or moved to prominent locations in the church. Exactly how these texts might have been read by congregations attending the church is, however, more speculative. But in other parts of the chapter, Sitz shows that even where temple inscriptions remained in place, the function of the temple could be forgotten: in hagiography, for instance, the temple of Jupiter Heliopolitanus at Baalbek could be reimagined as a structure built by Solomon (p. 185). Useful comparanda are drawn from the late antique synagogue at Sardis, where earlier inscriptions from the city's Metroön were incorporated alongside texts in Greek, Hebrew, and a local Anatolian language, suggesting some expectation that those earlier inscriptions could be read – a principle that surely applies to numerous Christian buildings.

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[7] See further J. T. Westerfeld: Egyptian Hieroglyphs in the Late Antique Imagination. Philadelphia 2019.

The final chapter 5 ("Erasure: [Damnatio Memoriae] or Conscious Uncoupling", pp. 202–264) moves to the topic of erasure in temple inscriptions. Here at last Sitz has much firmer evidence than in either chapter 3 or 4 that these texts were actually being read in Late Antiquity, since targeted acts of erasure demonstrate that they must have been. At Aphrodisias in Caria, the name of the city, which carried the power of the city's eponymous goddess Aphrodite, was erased in various contexts, including the famous Archive Wall in the theatre. On the lintel of the city's north-east gate, on the side facing into the city, moreover, an inscription reading "For the good fortune of the splendid metropolis of the Aphrodisians" was edited (by the erasure of some, but not all letters, and their replacement with new ones) to become "For the good fortune of the splendid metropolis of the Stauroupolitans", reflecting the city's metamorphosis from a city of Aphrodite to a city of the Cross. But this was part of an uneven campaign of erasure, and the name of the goddess remained unmolested in other contexts. This prompts Sitz to offer three considerations that influenced erasure or preservation: liminal spaces, like the city gate or entrance to the temple-church, were more likely to see erasures; so too were inscriptions that were easy to access; finally, how prominently visible an inscription was seems also to have influenced Christian activities. While Sitz wisely urges us not to regard these categories as hard and fast rules followed in every case (p. 232), she notes that they help explain targeted erasures at other sites that she makes the focus of case studies of Labraunda, Aizanoi, Antioch ad Cragum. But other examples are less clear cut: Sitz finishes with striking evidence from Pisidian Antioch of the destruction of the rural temple of Men Askaenos and the breaking up into more than two hundred fragments of a copy of the *Res Gestae* displayed on an as yet not clearly identified monument in the city centre. In both cases, Christianity has been invoked as a cause for the demolitions, but Sitz argues that while that remains plausible for the suburban sanctuary, the breaking up of the *Res Gestae* slabs might have a more prosaic explanation, in the quest for materials for lime kilns. The chapter also includes a discussion of the treatment of statues and other images, either through deliberate damage or removal (pp. 208–216). As always, contextual factors loom large: while cult statues might be smashed or removed, reliefs on Egyptian temples required different treatment, some of it requiring considerable resources to erase images many metres above ground level. Sitz notes, however, that the precision of epigraphic erasure offers more definitive evidence of targeted activity (p. 257).

Chapter 6 ("Unepigraphic Readings", pp. 265–276) provides a conclusion that not only summarises the book's arguments (pp. 266–270) but also emphasises key considerations that have underpinned the analysis. Sitz reminds us that no single, monolithic interpretation can be applied uniformly to the treatment of temple inscriptions; instead, local contextual factors must always be brought to bear on each case since local dynamics will have varied considerably from place to place. Equally important is that while the fates of ancient statues and inscriptions were often determined by similar historical trends, subtle differences in their treatment point to very real distinctions in attitudes to art and text. Even so, she argues, it is important to bear in mind that inscriptions were physical objects as much as they were texts, and different aspects of their physicality influenced how they were preserved, spoliated, or erased. Perhaps most controversially, Sitz argues that the afterlives of temple inscriptions, particularly their preservation, points to a more positive view of the texts, and the structures that bore them, in Christian Late Antiquity than might be guessed at from the fulminations against temples found in hagiography. Above all, Sitz emphasises the importance of understanding the physicality of inscriptions and their contexts and their continued presence in the landscape that goes beyond "the original texts and meaning"; after all, modern epigraphy is heir to a long tradition of decisions not just about the setting up of inscriptions, but also about their preservation, spoliation, and sometimes erasure (p. 276).

Sitz has provided us with a rich and compelling analysis of epigraphy, and of inscriptions as objects, as key to understanding the urban and religious histories of Late Antiquity. In particular, she demonstrates how consideration of inscribed texts often offers vistas quite different from those found in the literary texts that so often dominate the way the narrative of Christianisation is constructed. Her approach is cautious, often highlighting what cannot be said with any certainty and frequently emphasising (and perhaps protesting too much) that her approach is a subjective one. The nature of the surviving evidence means that the bulk of Sitz's case studies focus on Asia Minor rather more than the book's title might imply. Even so, such is the richness of that evidence that not only can interesting separate case studies be discussed, but also a significant number of cases can be assembled that make the overarching argument of this volume more persuasive than the sum of its variously compelling individual parts.

No doubt some readers will find points with which to quibble. The organisation of the discussion into distinct thematic strands on preservation, spoliation, and erasure means that discussion of individual sites is scattered across the different chapters, with the author frequently highlighting that a certain aspect touched upon in one discussion will be followed up elsewhere in the book (e.g. pp. 155, 182). I felt that the introductory discussion of literacy was perhaps too brief (although it runs pp. 17–20 it is in fact only a little over two pages) given the weight attached throughout the book to late antique readers being able to understand the inscribed texts before them. For a book that relies so heavily on inscriptions, I felt the absence of an epigraphic index rather keenly. I also felt that some of the illustrations were so small or indistinct as to make it difficult to see clearly the epigraphic features being discussed in the text (e.g. p. 75, fig. 3.1; p. 85, fig. 3.5; p. 167, fig. 4.6; p. 224, fig. 5.4). Some of the nods to contemporary culture might not be to every reader's taste, and I felt the characterisation that "histories and hagiographies are the social media of late antiquity" (p. 12) somewhat reductive: I would hope that troubled souls do not turn to Facebook, Instagram, or, heaven forbid, X in a serious quest for spiritual sustenance. Yet the discussion of the performativity of acts of destruction makes a good point by invoking the analogy of videos issued by Daesh documenting their campaigns of destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq (p. 11). There are occasional slips: the obelisk described by Ammianus Marcellinus 17.4 and discussed at pp. 34–35 is not the one set up by Augustus in the Circus Maximus and now in the Piazza del Popolo, but rather that brought to Rome by Constantius II in 357 and which has stood since the sixteenth century outside St John Lateran. Indeed, one wonders what a similar study of the West might offer: there too, after all, it is clear that inscriptions continued to be read, understood, and copied down into manuscripts, not least in the Carolingian period. The very fact that I am left wondering what a western equivalent of Sitz's study might look like is, however, surely an endorsement of the fine book that she has produced.

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