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Linda Ellis and Frank L. Kidner (eds) *Travel, Communication and Geography in Late Antiquity: Sacred and Profane* Ashgate Aldershot 2004; xix + 164 pp. 1 map and 6 black and white illustrations ISBN 0 7546 3535 X (hb) £42.50.

Communication has become a central topic in historical research. Identifying the ways in which different elements of society conveyed ideas and information to each other – in political, cultural, economic, and religious contexts – gives a picture of that society in action, of how it operated, which may be quite different from the self-representation projected by that society. Contemplating the texts and artefacts we work with as acts of communication between ancient contemporaries often helps us to gain a better understanding of the nature of the works themselves, and of their actual relationship with the lost past which we wish to reconstruct with their use. If we see texts (written, visual, architectural) not as direct windows onto the past but as intercepted transmissions, originally sent between parties with specific purposes and operating within particular frameworks, we can try to safeguard against the trap of accepting representation as reality. Our sources, after all, were not meant to provide us with historical information, but were generated as integral parts of complex interactions.

This engaging volume includes a dozen papers, originally presented at a 2001 US conference, one of a series of biennial international symposia on Late Antiquity, 'Shifting Frontiers.' The authors come from the USA, UK, and France. The book comprises three parts, each of four chapters: travel and communication for 'secular' purposes (here military, economic, and academic); aristocratic and ecclesiastical networks; and pilgrimage. Before the twelve papers, the editors provide a short introduction to the volume, followed by three further brief forewords to each of the parts, in which the main points of each chapter are briskly summarised. A further, more thematic overview to the whole volume is given by the Roman historian J. F. Drinkwater, who draws out common themes of the chapters and adds his own observations. It seems that the editors have been wary of the contents of their volume being perceived as disparate, as conference proceedings sometimes are, and have taken pains to ensure that important, unifying issues are brought to the fore.

In fact, while the papers do not claim to present a comprehensive account of the volume's broad topic, major issues undergird most of the book, and tie together not only the individual chapters but also the topic of late antique communication with that of earlier periods. 'Late Antiquity' remains a term open to different interpretations; here it stands for the later Roman empire of the fourth and fifth centuries, with a few forays into later centuries. Several of the papers position their research with regard to relevant recent studies in classical Greek and earlier Roman periods (e.g. Sian Lewis, *News and Society in the Greek Polis* [1996]; C. Adams and R. Laurence [eds], *Travel and Geography in the Roman Empire* [2001]). Indeed, comparison with earlier periods, particularly the Roman empire of the first three centuries after Augustus, is a recurring though not omnipresent motif. The editors in their introduction posit the later Roman empire as a society in which communication was on the upswing, with incidence of long-range travel and networks of influence amongst elites significantly beyond that of the early empire. They suggest that the 'universalising' nature of late Roman government (read: the drive to increased centralisation, at the expense of the traditional quasi-autonomy of cities under the earlier empire), combined with the similarly global ambitions of the Christian Church after Constantine, were forceful drivers of increased long-distance travel and communication.

One may at first look askance at this claim. Is it likely that the early empire of the Julio-Claudians, when Roman influence penetrated so deeply into the social structures of provincial cities as distant as Syria and Britain, developed a lesser communicative infrastructure than that of the despotic state of Diocletian and Constantine, so often portrayed as idealising social

immobility? Several of the modes of communication discussed by the contributors are themselves continuations of media developed in earlier Roman or Hellenistic times: travel to Athens as a centre of education, milestones, and the extensive use of letters as the medium of aristocratic *amicitia* are three obvious examples. Even Christian pilgrimage had both Hellenistic and Jewish precedents.

Yet the essays in this volume do constitute a collective case for burgeoning activity in particular forms of communication and travel in Late Antiquity. Papers in the second part of the volume, on aristocratic letter-writing networks, note that bulky collections of letters loom large among late antique sources. However much influenced by Cicero and Pliny stylistically, the extant collections of the Antiochian rhetor Libanius, the president of the Senate in Rome Symmachus, and the Milanese bishop Ambrose (analysed by Scott Bradbury, Michele Salzman, and J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz respectively) are significantly larger than those of their classical models, represent only a small proportion of the probable epistolary output of these figures, and (along with the letters of Augustine of Hippo) are but the highest trees in the shadows of which many smaller corpora of late antique letter collections huddle. Contingencies of survival need to be taken into account, but very high frequency of output (Libanius, it is estimated, must have produced a letter at least every second day), and the gathering of representative samples of an author's letters into collections which themselves were circulated amongst the same network of correspondents, do seem to be marked features of late antique aristocratic culture. Bradbury suggests that epistolary networks represent a survival tactic by provincial elites in the new empire centred on Constantinople: noble families who 'stayed local' risked missing out on participating in networks which could collectively protect their interests in the face of centralised imperial government.

When using letters and letter collections, it is often the externals of the documents – to whom they were addressed, when and where they were dispatched, how often one correspondent was contacted – which is informative, rather than the content *per se*. The collections enable us to map significant parts of the circuitry of aristocratic influence. The paper by Claire Sotinel, tracing lines of communication in episcopal rather than aristocratic correspondence, outlines a re-routing of such pathways, from the bishopric of Rome to the eastern imperial capital of Constantinople, in the early sixth century, when the post-imperial government of Italy by the Ostrogothic monarchy was ensconced in Ravenna. Letter carriers now passed through Ravenna, rather than via earlier itineraries around the Adriatic, suggesting that the royal government of Italy sifted these communications in order to

keep abreast of news and information passing from one side of the Mediterranean to the other. More broadly, Sotinel notes that, if survival of Italian episcopal collections is a guide, the political division of the post-imperial Mediterranean into the late Roman/Byzantine East and the autonomous 'barbarian' kingdoms of western Europe stimulated rather than dampened communications throughout the Church.¹ So not only the centralising political conditions of the late Roman empire, but also the centrifugal processes of its fragmentation, can be seen as stimulants to increased efforts for interchange.

If the framework within which letters circulated is revealing, the content of individual letters often seems to be irritatingly vacuous, presumably because the 'real' news was often passed on verbally and ephemerally by the carriers of letter (letters themselves were described a century ago as 'calling cards' by Samuel Dill in a book still very worth while reading²). Yet sometimes the contents of individual letters are informative. The article by Cam Grey on letters of recommendation for labourers relocating their services gives brief insight into a social network where not only was mobility a possibility for workers (which the legal sources have long since convinced us was virtually prohibited), but was in fact facilitated by 'vertical alliances' between landowners and labourers. Again, a seemingly fixed characteristic of modern views of the period, the harsh divide between the landed and the labouring classes, is challenged by evidence of communicative practices.

The papers on epistolary networks constitute some of the most interesting opportunities for 'observing' communication in action. A paper by Ray Lawrence examines a communicative function more commonly discussed in studies of the period, government propaganda, though in a little-studied context: late antique milestones. Milestones from the third to fourth centuries have a relatively high rate of survival. Like milestones of earlier Roman periods, they bear inscriptions; not, however, of magistrates who erected or restored the milestones, but texts commemorating the ruling emperors (or, again, the Ostrogothic monarch of early sixth-century Italy). These inscriptions, lining travel routes not unlike modern roadside hoardings, shared themes with coinage legends: they featured the same conventional, standardised, shorthand topoi of imperial ideology. Unlike coins, however, late- and post-Roman milestones often stood side-by-side or very near inscribed milestones from earlier centuries. Lawrence argues that this

¹ Cf the argument for increased secular, diplomatic communication throughout the post-imperial states in A. Gillett (2003) *Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411-533*, 3

² S Dill (1910) *Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western Roman Empire*, 2nd ed.

collocation itself served ideological purposes: a visual claim to continuity and stability between the past and present, written onto the infrastructure of travel.

The last cluster of papers concerns Christian pilgrimage, particularly to the Holy Land of Palestine, which became an increasingly frequent act of Christian devotion from the late fourth century onwards. Though visits to holy sites had pre-Christian precedents, two papers, by Maribel Dietz and Gillian Clark, argue for a nuanced understanding of late antique *peregrinatio*, usually but perhaps misleadingly translated as 'pilgrimage.' They suggest that early Christian pilgrimage was less concerned with reaching a particular holy site (as was the case with e.g. mediaeval British pilgrimage to Canterbury) than with the act of travel itself. It was an ascetic undertaking and an 'enacted metaphor' of the pilgrim as *peregrinus*, a spiritual foreigner in the world; a process, not a destination (something there perhaps for travel agents to exploit). This *peregrinatio* was influenced both by the contemporary growth of monastic asceticism, and by ancient images of travel (*apodemia*) as a virtuous and educative act by Greek philosophers from the pre-Socratics to the Neoplatonists. Along the way, well-connected pilgrims could also access 'holy networks' of hermits and monasteries throughout Palestine – replicating the patterns of aristocratic *amicitia* networks for 'spiritual tourists.' Eventually, however, the destination overtook the spiritual exercise of the journey as the dominant concept in Holy Land pilgrimage, not least because of the development (in the sense of modern real estate development) of key sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem as 'spiritual theme parks,' funded by empresses, who exploited pietistic euergetism as a means to establish personal power bases) separate from that of their spouses (discussed by Noel Lenski).

The papers in this volume offer insight into their varied social, political, and religious topics in Late Antiquity. They also, however, present valuable conceptual models, derived from the authors' close analysis of specific sources rather than from pre-existing theoretical models, of the interaction of elements of ancient societies. These models are potentially transferable to discussions of other periods of history; they offer informative and stimulating ways of approaching our sources.

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