The Lost History of Sextus Aurelius Victor by Justin A. Stover and George Woudhuysen (review)

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Book Reviews

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The Lost History of Sextus Aurelius Victor

Justin A. Stover and George Woudhuysen
Edinburgh Studies in Later Latin Literature.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023.
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There are few books that live up to the claims made on their back cover, but *The Lost History of Sextus Aurelius Victor* by Justin Stover and George Woudhuysen surely is a "radical rewriting of the history of fourth-century Latin literature." It is commonly accepted that Aurelius Victor was one of the fourth-century writers of historical *breviaria*, together with Festus and Eutropius, and that the *Historiae abbreviatae* (also called *Liber de Caesaribus*) represent the work as he wrote it. Scholars further tend to agree that a later summary history, the *Epitome de Caesaribus*, has been wrongly attributed to Victor and dates from the end of the fourth century.

The meticulous sifting of all the evidence by Stover and Woudhuysen unearths, however, a different reality. In fact, the *Historiae abbreviatae* and the *Epitome de Caesaribus* are epitomes of a lost, much larger history by Aurelius Victor that covered imperial history from Augustus to Julian. An accumulation of arguments builds a compelling case for this thesis. On the one hand, there are positive indications, such as the titles for both works in the medieval manuscripts and parallels in content and text up to 360 CE, including an identical phrase in the first person (*Hist. Abr.* 8.7; Aur. Vict. *Epit.* 8.6). These are, on the other, flanked by surveys of ancient epitomizing and critical reflections on methodological flaws in the work of the predecessors of Stover and Woudhuysen, to show that their solution fits with what we know about ancient literary practices.

Widely read in Late Antiquity, the history of Victor survived until the eighth century in Italy, when Paul the Deacon used it. Stover and Woudhuysen provide a convincing case that Paul actually created the *Epitome de Caesaribus*. A crucial piece of evidence are the *Scholia Vallicelliana*, composed by Paul on the basis of Victor, among other ancient authors. Stover and Woudhuysen also suggest that the *Origo Constantini imperatoris* (also called *Anonymus Valesianus I*), which they date to the early medieval period (eighth to ninth century instead of the fourth) also derives from Victor, as does the list of emperors in the calendar of Polemius Silvius (448–449 CE). This reinterpretation of the evidence makes much sense. The *Historiae abbreviatae* are known for their errors and confusions, which would be surprising for a work by a well-educated bureaucrat but which now can be safely blamed

on the epitomator. Indeed, Stover and Woudhuysen are at pains to stress the high quality of Victor's history, which must have contained precise and unique information, reflected a good knowledge of Greek and Latin classics, and relied on much of earlier Latin and Greek historiography as sources—in sum, "a worthy heir of Tacitus and fitting predecessor for Ammianus" (118).

They do not halt their iconoclasm there. The second part of the book challenges the commonly accepted existence of the Enmannsche Kaisergeschichte (EKG). This is a hypothetical source for much of fourth-century Latin historiography, supposedly covering imperial history until 337 or 357. Its core is a range of textual correspondences between Eutropius and the *Historiae abbreviatae*. The detailed criticism of the EKG hypothesis in chapter 6 is an impressive achievement, closely scrutinizing the assumptions that have closed the eyes of modern scholars for the more plausible assumption that Eutropius used Aurelius Victor. Just last year an edition of the fragments attributed to the EKG was published by B. Bleckmann (Paderborn, 2022), which sadly appeared too late for Stover and Woudhuysen to engage with.

As the EKG is taken to be a source of the *Historia Augusta*, this late fourth-century collection of imperial biographies is the next target. Stover and Woudhuysen show that it used Eutropius and Aurelius Victor as sources and not the non-existent EKG. In passing, they dispose of two traditional sources of the *Historia Augusta*: Marius Maximus, usually held to be a biographer of emperors until the early third century and the source of trivial information, and Syme's Ignotus, held to be the source for good information. *Quellenforschung* for the *Historia Augusta* is, thus, back to square one.

Finally, Stover and Woudhuysen tackle another long-standing conundrum of late antique historiography, namely the presence of good information, probably from a Latin source, in Byzantine histories. A sizeable group of scholars hold that the lost *Annales* of Nicomachus Flavianus (died 394) is the ultimate source of that information. Rightly criticizing this idea, Stover and Woudhuysen cut Flavianus down to size and argue that here too Victor is the source. His history probably entered the Greek tradition at several points, and Eunapius, writing at the end of the fourth century, is put forward as a likely candidate.

The second part is less exhaustive than the first, and Stover and Woudhuysen admit that more work is needed to re-assess the EKG, the sources of the *Historia Augusta*, and the "Latin source." This does not diminish the importance of their paradigm-shifting argument. It is the first in a long time to open up new avenues for investigation, even though Stover and Woudhuysen are candid and erudite enough to point out that some scholars in the nineteenth century had thought in the direction that they defend. The argument is detailed, careful, and meticulous. It does not seek to hide the methodological problems that the new thesis encounters but confronts the problems head-on. Both the *Historiae abbreviatae* and the *Epitome de Caesaribus* are epitomes of Victor, meaning that we do not possess Victor's actual words. Verbal similarities between the witnesses to Victor render it likely that the epitomator did preserve some of the original wording, but some uncertainty will remain and renders it difficult to trace with certainty the impact of Victor in the later tradition.

Further, the closing date of Victor's history remains unclear. As the *Historiae abbreviatae* and the *Epitome de Caesaribus* have different end points (360 and 388 CE), Stover and Woudhuysen propose the hypothesis that Victor updated his history at the end of his life. Yet, they point to some evidence that might suggest that already before 388 CE an extended version of Victor's history was circulating and used by Jerome and Ammianus (417). This leads to the suggestion that the second edition ran until 379, to which later a coda was attached. This may not be very satisfying.

New questions will also arise: if Victor's history was ubiquitous in Late Antiquity in Latin and Greek, how did it come about that not a single manuscript is preserved? Victor's contemporary Eutropius had a success comparable to what Stover and Woudhuysen ascribe to Victor, and we have a good manuscript tradition for him. The argument by Stover and Woudhuysen is often cumulative, adducing a sequence of plausible links to support the conclusion. Unavoidably, readers may find some of these stronger than others. For example, I found the argument that accounts from two different sources are complementary and hence derive from Victor not always very strong (368, 396). None of this, however, detracts from the merit and strength of the book, which undoubtedly marks a new phase in the study of Latin historiography in Late Antiquity. By showing that Aurelius Victor was the author of a high-quality, multivolume history of the empire until his own day, this brilliant book by Stover and Woudhuysen lays the foundation stone for a new understanding of fourth-century Latin historiography. Ammianus is no longer a lonely historian but rather Victor's competitor in a much more vibrant literary environment than we may have thought.

Debt in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near East: Credit, Money, and Social Obligation

EDITED BY JOHN WEISWEILER
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.
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The proclaimed aims of the ten collected essays in this volume are two: to contribute to a "history of ancient credit systems" and "to test the accuracy" of David Graeber's well-known grand narrative on debt (2). As for the first, it is a qualified success; the second will leave many readers, including the reviewer, with an unresolved paradox. Graeber's overarching program in *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (2011) is clearly explained in Weisweiler's introduction (chapter 1). Graeber held that credit, and therefore debt and attendant moralizing ideas, have been primal driving forces of human economic exchange. Other than moral injunctions, he argued that violence has been the key creator and enforcer of large-scale indebtedness and that states were the formalized structures that invented coinage as an efficient uniform computational mode of paying their hired enforcers, the soldiers in their armies. Whenever this configuration of state power receded—what Graeber calls the currency-slavery-warfare nexus—so did money in the form of currency and slavery as a form of labor. The structure of debt and state power, vitally linked to chattel slavery, first occurred on a global scale in Karl Jaspers' "Axial Age." Each contributor therefore considers Graeber's ideas within his or her own scholarly bailiwick in this time