Debt in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near East: Credit, Money, and Social Obligation ed. by John Weisweiler (review)

Brent D. Shaw

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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

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Reviewed by Brent D. Shaw
(Princeton University)

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

span—from Babylonian Mesopotamia to the post-Roman states of western Europe. Since the focus of this journal is Late Antiquity, I shall consider the final half dozen contributions that are most relevant to its concerns and, amongst these, focus on the ones that most directly grapple with Graeber's big theory. These chapters are especially welcome because, as Neville Morley observes, "Rome is a striking absentee from Graeber's historical narrative" (85).

Of the latter contributions, one that puts Graeber's ideas directly to the test is, paradoxically, John Weisweiler's essay on late Roman antiquity (chapter 7). I say "paradoxically" because, unlike the paean to Graeber with which Weisweiler begins the book (chapter 1), all the facts arraigned in his essay speak directly against the big picture advocated by the anthropologist. Late Roman antiquity, he shows, was not a time marked by the dissolution of previous economic or political forces; it did not lapse into a species of non-currency economy; it did not witness a much weakened system of coinage; there was no great decline in trade networks; large rural estates did not become autarkic; in most regions of the empire populations did not plunge downward; slavery did not decline; and the general economy was not in recession or becoming "proto-feudal" in nature. Weisweiler demonstrates the falsity of such claims in detail. He could have added much more. Far from gradually becoming an under-monetized entity, the empire of the fourth and fifth centuries, was relatively saturated with coinage—a picture sustained not just by the evidence of coin hoards (as pointed out by Weisweiler) but by a host of surface and other occasional finds. There was not less but more coined money around than ever before. And as the detailed research of Kyle Harper has shown, far from vanishing slavery remained as deeply entrenched as ever. Furthermore, the contributions by Arietta Papaconstantinou (chapter 10) on the Egyptian papyri of the late antique to early Islamic period and the essay by Alice Rio (chapter 11) on the early mediaeval west both confirm how fundamentally mistaken Graeber was not only in his claims about coinage but about the economy in general and its relationship to militarized states. Indeed, Papaconstantinou (148) wonders aloud why Graeber had not consulted a work as basic as Chris Wickham's *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (2005). She points out that the analytical boxes that he uses—Greek city-states, Roman empire, the "Middle Ages"—are conventional ones of a canonical Western Civ story. Their validity is not questioned nor is any explanation offered of the huge dynamics of the evolving changes across them. They are the same traditional units used by the old-fashioned Marxism of a Hindess and Hirst or a Perry Anderson in the 1970s. As Alice Rio indicates (chapter 11), the "middle ages" are critical to Graeber's theory, for without his (long discredited) caricature of them, his story lacks the wave-like nature that he postulates for his story. She has no trouble in demonstrating that his picture is false in almost every important respect, that it is "rooted in a traditional and now essentially discarded narrative" (164). Given the facts of western European developments in the centuries concerned, Rio's observation that "Graeber's narrative is some way off the current state of the field" is a generous act of scholarly understatement. The egregiously false claims, essential to his argument, include, for example, "the simultaneous disappearance of chattel

slavery around 600 CE in India, China, and Europe" (168). It would be happy if the study of early Islamic Arabia by Bonner (chapter 10) could add more, but almost the whole of the chapter is consumed by frustrating, and largely inconclusive, debates on the nature of the source materials. I only quote his one relevant conclusion (147): "David Graeber has pointed out that some debt-related phenomena of the 'Axial Age' lost much of their harshness during the medieval era, with the Islamic world taking the lead. This may seem strange since the Islamic world continued to practice slavery well into the modern age." Another problem, as Richard Payne discerns, is the disutility of the concept "Axial Age" for historians. He rightly advises them to reject its use (122). Indeed, it is by getting beyond both an "Axial Age" and the narrow confines of a "coinage-slavery-military" complex that Payne essays a compelling study of the moral universe of Zoroastrianism (chapter 8). His conclusion is that the multi-valent links between state and religious power "helps to account for the co-development of empire and Zoroastrianism, especially in late antiquity" (129). While this might be true, it is difficult to see how Graeber's "new useful tools" allow us to explain better how the novel ideological systems of the time reinforced secular powers (121). A series of recent books by Peter Brown alone would suggest that historians have been able to answer that question just as well without the novel Graeberian tools. Alas, instead of the large number of basic contradictions like these setting off alarm bells, as they should, they seem to be set aside in favor of declaring that Graeber's ideas "inspire hope" (83), are "quite helpful" (107), are "useful to think with" (163), or are "a wonderful gift" (178). The reviewer, as the reader must divine by now, dissents.

I suspect that the evidence arraigned in the various chapters will have little effect on the already convinced who will probably take them as confirmation of Graeber's story. Rather alarmingly, indeed, we are encouraged by one contributor to view Graeber "not as an historian but as a prophet" (149). The core problem is that debt has been an ever-present verity of complex social interactions in the past, as have slavery and the armed power of states. It's a bit like breathing air and drinking water. So it is difficult to disprove an essentialist claim made for it as a core engine of historical development. As *passé* an historian as Finley long ago pointed out the critical importance of debt as an instrument of social control and coercion and the debt struggle as one that configured the world of the free citizen in Mediterranean antiquity. En route, he asked significant questions as to why, for example, some better off persons would even bother to lend to individuals whom they knew could not pay them back. Predatory lending, in short, was not a happenstance spinoff of the presence of slaves or military power—not then and not now.

More intriguing is the almost inexplicable mesmeric effect that Graeber has on otherwise technically adept and rational historians. Whatever the grand theory's fundamental faults, ones that would surely reprove any work that historians might be considering, the contributors persist in wanting to find virtue in it. It is truly alarming to find that "even if *Debt* is not a work of history, it uses history to make an argument" (150). But surely a work that is "not history" for the obvious reason that its "history" is so mythical is hardly "using" history as much as

abusing it. Laudably, Papaconstantinou, for one, investigates the facts of how debt functioned in practice at ground level as recorded in the dense papyrological record that enables such an inquiry. She finds that at almost every point of strategic significance the facts contradict the grand theory. This said, however, we might usefully turn to the other aim of this collection. Beyond the documenting of contrarian facts, the individual studies are valuable historical analyses of debt both as an economic fact, as an instrument of social coercion, and as a moral category of thought (as well as related matters). The prospective reader is encouraged to consult them for their insights on these problems. They achieve this praiseworthy goal, however, in the face of their quixotic devotion to a "big idea" which, beyond its most simplistic levels, ought by now to be seen as thoroughly discredited and fundamentally at odds with the record of the past.

Time and Difference in Rabbinic Judaism

Sarit Kattan-Gribetz
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Reviewed by Marie-Ange Rakotoniaina (Yale University, Institute for Sacred Music)

Upon sitting with Sarit Kattan Gribetz's *Time and Difference in Rabbinic Judaism*, the reader journeys through the multifaceted temporal worlds that the rabbis' imagination fashioned in Late Antiquity, from Roman Palestine to the Sasanian Empire, from Second Temple times to the Talmud. To reveal how these universes of time in turn intersect with the creation of forms of difference within and beyond the rabbinic community—such is the promise of the book. It does so with exquisite erudition and delightful readability, while distilling the conceptualization of "rabbinic timescapes" (1, 5, and 22)—as the author put it, "the many dimensions of time that operate within any given society—similar to the use of 'landscape' to describe the variety of natural and human dimensions of space in any given location" (258 n. 16). The approach taken does not merely spatialize time. It actualizes and classifies its multiplicity as contained in rabbinic texts: time reveals itself as at once mythic and quotidian, historical and lived, ritual and biological. The book aims at demonstrating how these dimensions of time function as vectors of cohesion and separation.

The Introduction sets the scene upon the remains of a lost epoch: the disappearance of the temple leaving behind it a "temporal trauma" (9). Henceforth a "conceptual temple" commands the rabbinic effort to re-imagine and negotiate the shifting boundaries of timekeeping and community. The following chapters associate a particular configuration of time—from the units of the year and the week to that of the day and the hour—to the formation of a series of respective dualities: between rabbis and Romans, Jews and Christians, men and women, human and divine. Each chapter's textual analyses embody the playfulness of rabbinic engagement with time, their refusal to dwell in the past or linger in an uncatchable future. They would rather drink the promise of the present. Emulating this promise, the book offers itself as much as the linear unfolding of temporal scales as the sketching of a mosaic of identities generated by quotidian rhythms. In other words, imagine a rabbinic replay of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* or Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Time has captivated countless studies. In the context of the most recent