



PROJECT MUSE®

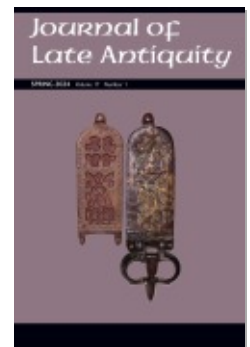
---

*The Acts of Early Church Councils: Production and Character*  
by Thomas Graumann (review)

Alexander H. Pierce

Journal of Late Antiquity, Volume 17, Number 1, Spring 2024, pp.  
287-290 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jla.2024.a927804>



➔ *For additional information about this article*  
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/927804>

possible involvement of the honorees in the tax relief that, originally granted to the Campanian cities by Gratian, ended up affecting Crete by virtue of its tributary connection with Capua. Though, unfortunately, not unequivocally provable due to the vagueness of the epigraphical corpus, the theory is nonetheless intriguing: the analysis of the evidence collected is convincing and well developed, and the proposal is based on the observation of actual relationships between the honorees and the Italian region that might have fostered such a turn of events.

Closing the volume are a catalog of the inscriptions pertinent to the cycle of Asclepiodotus (Bigi, Tantillo, Magnelli) supplemented by some additional texts of relevance; an appendix on constitutions, epigraphs, and literary passages useful in framing Probus's prefectorial career; a general bibliography with list of abbreviations; indices of sources, places, and people; and a section of tables. The volume is clean and carefully edited, and the frequent display of maps, tables, images, and reproductions is of great use to the reader.

There is an unfortunate inconsistency present in the treatment of ancient texts, which are provided with translation in the epigraphic catalog but not always within the individual chapters, quite rarely in the endnotes, and never in the appendix. More attention to internal consistency and clarity would surely have been the right complement to an otherwise very well thought-out and structured work.

The volume clearly demonstrates great care and thorough research. The individual chapters are articulated in a meticulous and tight demonstration of the theories advocated and pursued through the careful sifting of every available source. The constant comparison with

earlier interpretive ideas, as constructive dialogue rather than sterile criticism, is carried forward as the guiding thread of a work that demonstrates well the potential of historical analysis conducted in light of mutual collaboration between disciplines and approaches.

***The Acts of Early Church Councils: Production and Character***

THOMAS GRAUMANN

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Pp. xii + 333. ISBN: 978-0-1988-6817-0

Reviewed by Alexander H. Pierce  
(North American Lutheran Seminary)

Professor of Ancient Christian History and Patristics Studies at the University of Cambridge, Thomas Graumann has provided massive gains to the modern study of late antique and medieval church councils. Graumann's latest contribution, *The Acts of Early Church Councils: Production and Character*, offers a window into the complex and largely unpredictable operations underlying extant conciliar acts and canons. As Graumann explains, the method of his examination is to attend at one and the same time to concurrent descriptions of conciliar documentation and to retrospective assessments of those documents in later conciliar contexts. Together, these vantage points enable Graumann to reconstruct the likely "expectations and conventions" for conciliar acts and the various constituents thereof (7).

Graumann's study focuses on conciliar texts of "session-protocols that present themselves as the direct records of 'live' oral interventions by individual speakers" (9). Although Graumann draws upon numerous records of this kind, the predominant sources of his study include the Conference at Carthage

(411), the Council of Ephesus (431), and the Council of Chalcedon (451). The book contains five parts:

- I. The Quest for Documentation
- II. “Reading” and “Using” Acts
- III. “Writing” Acts: The Council’s Secretariat in Action
- IV. The Written Record
- V. Files, Collections, Editions: Dossierization and Dissemination

The first part includes three chapters. Chapter one provides a historical overview of early church councils and their documents. Graumann describes the increasing role of church councils as an institution in the life of the church and summarizes the diverse and complicated processes required to facilitate the documentation that supported their institutional functions. Chapter two explores the wide range of characteristics and qualities constitutive of what are commonly referred to as conciliar “acts.” The third chapter examines the Conference at Carthage (411) as a most vivid example of the technical strategies employed to ensure a reliable conciliar record. That this conference involved the contested parties of Catholics and Donatists in Africa Proconsularis meant that particular care and clarity was required to secure a trustworthy record that could speak to the present imperial outcome but also remain reliable for posterity.

Part 2 contains four chapters. The fourth chapter draws upon two imperial inquiries in April of 449 into the trial of the archimandrite Eutyches the previous year as well as Augustine’s awaiting official documents to respond to the 415 Synod of Diospolis. Graumann uses these two episodes to show that, in reviewing earlier trials and councils, only the fully authentic original record (prizing *authentica* over *antigrapha*) or official protocol

(*ecclesiastica gesta*) would suffice. Chapter 5 builds on this discussion by illustrating how the transcription of the authentic council record (the *schedarion*) onto a roll of papyrus (most commonly) allows us to draw a variety of conclusions. The physical form of a roll functions as supporting evidence for conciliar records’ probable authenticity, established their resemblance to administrative texts, dictated their promise and limitations for arranging information, and required certain compositional practices. In chapter 6, Graumann goes into further detail regarding the importance of the physical and paratextual features used for authenticating documents, whether protocols or associated files. Chapter 7 examines the ecumenical councils of Constantinople III (680/681) and Nicaea II (787) to validate further the notion witnessed at Chalcedon (451) that the visual appearance of conciliar records was integral to the authority and reliability posterity would assign to them.

The third part, which includes chapters 8 to 10, attends to the practices and intentions underlying the complex processes that led from live sessions to final, redacted conciliar *acta*. In chapter 8, Graumann considers evidence from several councils to describe the administrative persons—for example, scribes (*scribae*), notaries (*notarii*), and speed-writers (*exceptores*)—and practices employed by council presidents to produce official protocols. Chapter 9 reports on the demands placed upon conciliar stenographers in giving voice to the proceedings in the form of minutes that fulfilled the agenda of the council president and represented the consensus of the council. The tenth chapter tracks the editorial process of consolidating short-hand notes on wax tablets and accompanying documents into a conciliar protocol.

In part 4, Graumann examines the various facets of conciliar records in five chapters. Chapter 11 explores the common use of τὰ ὑπομνήματα to identify imperial and ecclesiastical meeting records. The veracity and legitimacy of the theological content of a council was contingent upon the legal and bureaucratic standing of its documentation. Graumann emphasizes the necessary intertwining of a conciliar record's reliable formality (πρόξις) with its trustworthiness (πίστις). The purpose of chapter 12 is to recount the "principles and mechanisms governing" (202) the use and arrangement of documents, revealing the range of strategies that could determine how documents were ordered in the compilation of a given council record. The thirteenth chapter makes a compelling case that the abridgement of conciliar proceedings need not be interpreted as delegitimizing them or even suggesting later interference. Rather, the work of summation or condensing can be a local phenomenon, the result of a council's own interests and its protagonists' own wishes. In chapter 14, Graumann details the conventions for gathering and appending signatures of subscription to council rolls. The final chapter of part 4 attempts to provide a proposal for what the "ideal protocol" might involve. Graumann contends that ultimately it is a protocol that successfully achieves the council president's persuasive objectives relative to audiences present and future.

The final part of the monograph consists of chapters 16 through 18, in which Graumann examines the activities undertaken after the completion of the compositional and editorial processes. Chapter 16 considers the significance of gathering various documents together into a materially unified text that presents the council's activities and conclusions in a

continuous and coherent manner. If chapter 16 considers the collection of individual protocols, chapter 17 analyzes how the several protocols of a single council are compiled together with other documents (for example, letters and reports) in a process Graumann calls "dossierization," to form the *acta* of a council. Chapter 18 analyzes how conciliar documents come to be allocated and received within later manuscript traditions. Graumann explains that conciliar acts were not frequently consulted outside the setting of councils, for they were quite unwieldy in their long-hand, continuous form. Aside from the popular oral histories to which councils often gave rise, it was in subsequent councils that conciliar records were taken up anew, in service to "an ideology of unbroken continuity, even identical repetition of their timeless truths" (295). The book ends with a short conclusion in which Graumann effectively summarizes the most noteworthy insights of his research.

The merits of Graumann's latest contribution go far beyond what I can speak to here, but allow me to mention a few. Despite the scholarly desire to find patterns, to lay bare reliably stable conventions, and to arrive at a synthesis, Graumann shows consistent discipline in his assertion that the documentation of early Christian councils is irreducibly variegated along several axes (for example, patterns of recording, editing processes, assumptions, and so on). His research unveils detailed information about the way conciliar records came to be and how they were later received. It utilizes both the records themselves and their reception to uncover the assumptions, expectations, and intentions in the composition and redaction of conciliar protocols. Graumann accomplishes all this while familiarizing his readers with many of the most notable

conciliar records still extant today. If there are any questions worth registering, it is perhaps whether the method of the study was optimal for organizing and presenting the knowledge Graumann has accumulated. The book does concentrate mostly on the wealth of resources from the first half of the fifth century, but the way Graumann thematized his chapters places a significant burden on the reader trying to put together any single council's process from start to finish. The scholar who shares Graumann's specific interest in one of the stages of composition, for instance, is not burdened but greatly aided by Graumann's attending to the range and diversity of witnesses as they are resistant to simple definition or classification. However, the scholar wanting to understand individual councils and the compositional history of their *acta* will experience some difficulty. In short, the book's greatest merit may be for some its foremost difficulty. Nevertheless, scholars of the early Church interested in its institutional life and its textual productions will find Graumann's work invaluable. Graumann has offered a great service to the field insofar as many scholars of early Christianity are only slowly coming to recognize the contours and significance of late antique church councils.

***Urban Space between the Roman Age and Late Antiquity: Continuity, Discontinuity and Changes***

EDITED BY A. CORTESE AND G. FIORATTO  
Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2022.  
Pp. 178. ISBN: 978375436605

Reviewed by Miko Flohr  
(Leiden University)

This edited volume publishes the proceedings of a workshop on late antique transformations of urban space in the

Roman and post-Roman Mediterranean held at Regensburg in February 2020. It consists of seven chapters preceded by an introductory chapter authored by the two editors and a concluding discussion by Nadin Burkhardt. The individual chapters vary somewhat in their scope and approach, but there is a some emphasis on developments in Anatolia and surrounding regions further to the East, though two papers focus on the city of Aquileia in Northern Italy. Thematically, there is a slight focus on religion and religious architecture. Ideologically, as the editors rightly observe, the chapters are connected by the fact that they tend to see Late Antiquity as a “time of renewal and transformation” (9) rather than as an era of decline. The volume certainly offers ammunition to those who want to stress the vitality of urban communities in Late Antiquity, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean—but at the same time, this reviewer feels that the book does not offer a strong case against those who wish to argue that there (also) was substantial urban decline or abandonment.

The two chapters following the introduction focus on Aquileia. The first, by Fioratto, analyses the transformation of the “peri-urban” space of Aquileia in order to assess the demographic development of the city after the third century CE. F. argues how particularly in the fourth century, domestic structures in several areas appear to have been transformed or abandoned, suggesting a decline in the population. The second chapter, by Furlan, uses waste management as a perspective to understand the transformation of the city between the third and fifth century CE. It sketches a similar picture to Fioratto's, one of general urban decline, though Furlan notes, rightly, that the gradual break-down of the early imperial