

The Christianization of Knowledge in Late Antiquity

The Christianization of Knowledge in Late Antiquity: Intellectual and Material Transformations traces the beginning of Late Antiquity from a new angle. Shifting the focus away from the Christianization of people or the transformation of institutions, Mark Letteney interrogates the creation of novel and durable structures of knowledge across the Roman scholarly landscape, and the embedding of those changes in manuscript witnesses. Letteney explores scholarly productions ranging from juristic writings and legal compendia to theological tractates, military handbooks, historical accounts, miscellanies, grammatical treatises, and the *Palestinian Talmud*. He demonstrates how imperial Christianity inflected the production of truth far beyond the domain of theology – and how intellectual tools forged in the fires of doctrinal controversy shed their theological baggage and came to undergird the great intellectual productions of the Theodosian Age and their material expressions. Letteney’s volume offers new insights and a new approach to answering the perennial question: What does it mean for Rome to become Christian? This title is also available as Open Access on Cambridge Core.

Mark Letteney is an assistant professor of history at the University of Washington. He holds a PhD from Princeton University and has held fellowships at the American Academy in Rome and the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. He is coauthor, with Matthew D. C. Larsen, of *Ancient Mediterranean Incarceration* (University of California Press, forthcoming 2024).

“Mark Letteney’s book approaches the question of the rise of Christianity in the late Roman Empire through a new perspective: not the more traditional one of Christianizing people, doctrinal controversies or demographic changes, but that of knowledge structures. The book is characterized by a particularly careful exegesis of the sources and a very extensive comparison with the earlier literature. It stands out for its great originality and is an uncommon example of how productive research in Late Antiquity can be given the aptitude for capturing the echoes that can come from texts of diverse origins.”

– Lucio De Giovanni, Università di Napoli Federico II

“Letteney’s remarkable new book charts the impact of Christianity not on religion or institutions – the focus of so much work on early Christianity – but rather on the organization of knowledge and the production of meaning in Late Antiquity. Drawing on a range of specialized texts (law codes, technical and bureaucratic treatises, military handbooks, and so on), he demonstrates that the particular forms of meaning-making that emerged in the context of theological and doctrinal dispute became broadly generalized in late-antique thought, and could be found in everything from the writings of the jurists to the *Palestinian Talmud*. A compelling and sensitive new sociology of knowledge, *The Christianization of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* will be required reading for students of early Christianity and the cultures of Late Antiquity, and will also be of interest to everyone working on the production of knowledge in premodern societies more generally.”

– Carlos F. Noreña, University of California, Berkeley

“Mark Letteney has produced a remarkable book that seeks to answer a question of relevance still today: What difference did Christianity make to Rome? Letteney contends that the fourth century was not a time of pagan–Christian conflict, nor a simple transition from a Roman to a new Christian empire, but rather a period of rupture as well as creative construction in the very ways in which fourth-century Nicene Christians made arguments and conveyed knowledge. These changes were promoted by the emergence of the codex and of new tools of Christian scholarship that promulgated a novel and long-lasting late antique book-oriented culture. Drawing on Roman law, ancient technical treatises, Christian theology, and Rabbinic texts, Letteney shows the development of this shared book culture and new scholarly practices that gradually permeated the empire and transcended religious differences as Nicene Christians emerged in the late fourth century in positions of power as the new elite of Rome. Letteney’s book thus provides original and thoughtful insight into why the Christianization of Rome matters to intellectual as well as religious history.”

– Michele Salzman, University of California, Riverside

The Christianization of Knowledge in Late Antiquity

Intellectual and Material Transformations

MARK LETTENY

University of Washington



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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	page ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xv
1 Christianizing Knowledge, or a Beginning of Late Antiquity	1
Observations on Method	8
Beyond Comparison	12
Theologians and Jurists	18
PART I NEW READERS	
2 A History of Christian Fact Finding	25
Epistemic and Preceptual Knowledge in Antiquity	28
Christian Scholastic Practices	31
Ignatius	33
Justin Martyr	36
Irenaeus	43
Tertullian	49
The <i>Gospel of Truth</i>	55
Conclusion	61
3 A Methodological Revolution in Fourth-Century Theology	64
Constantine's Idealized World Order: Universality through Unity	64
Athanasius of Alexandria	71
Athanasius and the "Canon"	78
Concerning the Decrees	81
Conclusion	84
4 A New Order of Books in the Theodosian Age	87
Tools of the Trade: Aggregation, Distillation, and Promulgation	87

Interpretation and “Patristic Commentary”	89
Christian Aggregation	91
<i>The Proceedings of the Council of Ephesus</i> (431)	97
Aggregation beyond Theology	101
Traditionalist Rejection	112
Post-Theodosian Collection, or the Shift to Florilegia	119
Conclusion	122
PART II NEW TEXTS	
5 New Bookforms	127
The Code(x)	127
Christians and the Codex	130
Canon and Codex	134
Conclusion	144
6 New Texts	145
Gratian’s Talisman	146
Ambrose: <i>Concerning the Faith</i>	148
Hilary: <i>Concerning the Synods</i>	154
Jerome’s Obelus	160
The Problem of Discernment in Nontheological Texts	163
New Texts	166
7 Christian Tools in Traditionalist Texts	172
<i>Nomina Sacra</i> and <i>Nomina Vulgaria</i>	174
Conclusion	197
8 New Meanings	199
Rules for Deciding	202
Institutionalized Suspicion of Documents and Archives	209
The Proceedings of the Council of Chalcedon	211
The Theodosian Talmud	217
Conclusion	224
Conclusion	225
<i>Case Study: The Theodosian Code in Its Christian</i>	
<i>Conceptual Frame</i>	231
<i>Magisterium Vitae</i> and Christian Tradition	234
<i>Lex Generalis</i> in Classical Jurisprudence	238
General Law in Christian Tradition	245
The <i>Theodosian Code</i> and General Law	249
“Resting on the Force of Edicts or on Sacred Imperial	
General Law”	254
<i>Bibliography</i>	263
<i>Index</i>	285

Figures

1	Religious identification of western senate high-office holders at time of highest office	<i>page</i> 123
2	Relative proportion of book formats, 350 BCE–800 CE	131
3	Books extant by format, 350 BCE–800 CE	131
4	Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Cod. 212, f. 113v	132
5	Stemma of <i>Theodosian Codices</i> described in <i>Gesta Senatus</i> 7	143
6	Stiftsbibliothek Lavanttal 1, 34r	149
7	Stiftsbibliothek Lavanttal 1, 10v	150
8	Stiftsbibliothek Lavanttal 1, 15r	151
9	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Lat. 8907, 298v	152
10	Stiftsbibliothek Lavanttal 1, 4r	152
11	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Lat. 8907, 315r	153
12	Stiftsbibliothek Lavanttal 1, 33v	153
13	Vat. Arch.Cap.S.Pietro.D.182, 303r	155
14	Vat. Arch.Cap.S.Pietro.D.182, 303v	155
15	Vat. Arch.Cap.S.Pietro.D.182, 304r	155
16	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Lat. 2630, 320r	157
17	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Lat. 2630, 322r	158
18	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Lat. 2630, 335r	158
19	Vat. Reg. Lat. 886, 17r	165
20	Vat. Reg. Lat. 886, 244r	166
21	Vat. Lat. 3867, 86r	176
22	<i>P. Haun</i> III 45	179
23	<i>P. Haun</i> III 45	180
24	CPL 73 B <i>recto</i>	180
25	Supralineate abbreviations in <i>P. Haun</i> III 45	181

26	Supralineate contractions in <i>P. Haun</i> III 45	182
27	Vat. Urb. Lat. 1154, 20v	185
28	Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Latin cod. 15, 162r	189
29	Vat. Lat. 10959, 1r	190
30	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Lat. 5730, 22v	191
31	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Lat. 5730, 28r (left); Stiftsbibliothek Lavanttal 1, 54v (right)	192
32	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Lat. 5730, 25v (left); Stiftsbibliothek Lavanttal 1, 54v (right)	192
33	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Lat. 5730, 2v (left); Stiftsbibliothek Lavanttal 1, 8v (right)	192
34	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Lat. 5730, 9r (left); Stiftsbibliothek Lavanttal 1, 7r (right)	192
35	Occurrences of the lemma <i>magisterium</i> across Latin literature	236
36	Occurrences of lemma <i>magisterium</i> across Latin literature, Christians separate	236

"In *The Christianization of Knowledge in Late Antiquity*, Mark Letteney offers a profoundly new and powerful analysis of late ancient intellectual life. He argues that a new model for social authority gave rise to a new form of argument, whose prestige status shaped developments across disparate fields of inquiry, from theology to law and far, far beyond. It's a book with a thesis, and it deserves to be read and debated by anyone interested in late antiquity."

– Clifford Ando, University of Chicago

"This daring synthesis explores a change almost too big to be seen. Letteney shows how the Christian search for certitude in matters of theology spilled over in the fourth and fifth centuries to affect other disciplines – Roman law, Greek philosophy, even rabbinic argument. The result was a new cultural ideal that attempted to press from an exuberantly diverse ancient heritage the pure, translucent honey of universal truths."

– Peter Brown, Princeton University

"The Christological convulsions of the fourth century did more than establish Nicaea as the index of orthodoxy. They changed how knowledge was generated. They changed how texts were deployed and read. They changed the nature – and the physical format – of the book itself. *The Christianization of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* reconstructs this revolution in reading practices and politics, a revolution that affected jurists and rabbis no less than bishops and emperors. In tracing how shifts in book forms led to shifts in thinking, Mark Letteney offers nothing less than a new means to measure how Christianity profoundly altered the culture of late antique Rome."

– Paula Fredriksen, Boston University

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