Emma Southon: Marriage, Sex and Death. The Family and the Fall of the Roman West. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2017 (Social Worlds of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages 1). 254 p. € 99.00. ISBN: 978-94-6298-035-8.

This is, in many respects, a very useful book. The family of the late Roman world is a well-researched topic, but there are few monograph-length studies that focus on the immediate post-Roman world (a term that Southon contends however, preferring 'post-imperial', to off-set moralistic ideas of decline, 18). Until now, this uneven pattern of scholarship has made especially teaching on the family in Late Antiquity (understood, following Peter Brown, as the period c. 200 to c. 700) very difficult and fragmented. Southon's book is explicitly based on materials deriving from territories progressively finding themselves outside the Roman polity after 400, particularly law codes and ecclesiastical treatises. It contains two hugely helpful appendices that list, at a glance, both the Roman and the post-Roman evidence on key aspects of family law, making it easy to follow developments. On academic reading lists the book should therefore have pride of place next to earlier key studies, such as Geoffrey Nathan's more Rome-focussed *The Family in Late Antiquity*, for complementation and comparison.

The book comes in three parts, following the typical life-cycle of a family. Despite the title, there is, regrettably, no dedicated section on the impact of death on families in this period, although Southon discusses inheritance patterns throughout the book (e.g. in the case of childlessness 58–59). Instead, Southon surveys norms, customs and practices around betrothal (or 'the creation of households', 29), marriage, and parenthood, including of adult children, bringing the discussion full circle back to marriage arrangements for the next generation. On each of these themes, Southon gets to grips with important topics, such as the directions of property transfer upon marriage (Chapter 1.1), abortion, infanticide and exposure (Chapter 1.5), attitudes towards adultery (Chapter 2.3) or the meaning of fatherhood (Chapter 3.2). Her conclusions are not always necessarily new. For example, she largely follows Ruth Karras[1] in arguing that the bilateral transfer of property upon betrothal, previously seen as 'Germanic' custom, can also be observed in the

1 R. Karras: The History of Marriage and the Myth of 'Friedelehe'. In: Early Medieval Europe 14, 2006, 119–151.

late Roman empire, and must therefore be seen as a more 'global' change of attitudes towards the value of women in this period. However, Southon has the gift of laying out and ordering the evidence in a clear and sustained manner that makes it easy to grasp what is at stake. For instance, her distinction between 'ante-natal and post-partum' strategies of family planning is inspired, as it allows at one glance to see how much more important the latter ones were in this period, at least to contemporary authors. Southon's two chapters on fatherhood (one dealing with fatherhood and property, and one dealing with the relationships between fathers and children) are hugely important, if only because there has as yet, surprisingly, been no comparable published treatment of the post-Roman father's role in the family. At least in a legal sense, the Roman family revolved around the *paterfamilias* and his paternal power (*patria potestas*), so Southon's study has the potential of putting analysis of family structures in Late Antiquity on a new footing. Her attention throughout to the emotional side of family relationships has to be commended, too. She often manages to tease out the dissonance between legal prescriptions and human behaviour, as in her investigation on the role of a bride's consent to marriage as described in Eucheria of Marseilles' poetry, a rare instance of a female voice in this period (53–55).

Despite all this welcome and detailed attention to different aspects of the family, Southon is less forthcoming on what they all mean, despite promising, once again in the title, that the book tackles 'the fall of Rome'. The observant reader of this book – at least one who has some means to compare with structures and customs of earlier Roman families which are not consistently laid out here – comes away with the following impression. By the year 700, the family was a less vertical affair, more focused on the conjugal couple, less of a power sphere for fathers (who usually passed on some of their property to children during their lifetime), more defined as an emotional unit of parents and children, more in danger of being questioned as the most desirable lifestyle due to the rise of celibacy and monasticism, and hence, overall, perhaps more recognisable to the modern family. Southon does not consider material culture around the family (and overall, deals more with ideas and norms than with experiences), but other studies, for example by Guy Halsall,[2] have shown that some of these aspects are visible in the

2 E.g. G. Halsall: Burial, Ritual and Merovingian Society. In: J. Hill/M. Swan (eds.): The Community, the Family and the Saint: Patterns of Power in Early Medieval Europe. Turnhout 1994 (International Medieval Research 4), 325–338.

archaeological record too, especially the more horizontal structures of families who, as burial practices show, were less able to maintain identities over long periods of time. These are, to this reader, momentous changes, but Southon both understates their significance and does not really explain what caused them. She vehemently rejects a Germanic/Roman dichotomy (14), while pointing at the commonality with late Roman norms and customs, so is not really addressing the question of 'the fall of Rome'. Where she does consider change, she identifies 'Christian thought' as its 'driver' (201). Dismissal of ethnic difference as an explanator for change is surely the right approach, and Christianity without doubt brought new cultural values. Yet, not all of the developments described above are just continuing from the Roman past or are necessarily 'Christian', or at least Southon does not always explain sufficiently why they would be. It is, for example, hard to see what the emergence of bi-lateral property transfers upon marriage has to do with Christianity, rather than with a desire to create cohesion between basic social entities in an increasingly unstable world. Sometimes one has to acknowledge that Western Europe became more fragmented in this period.

The book is overall nicely produced, but there is evidence for some odd editing practices. Apart from the blunder of the title (which raises the suspicion of a marketing department's belief that both 'death' and 'the fall of Rome' sell), the bibliography has clearly been through a software programme that alphabetically misplaced titles and frequently reproduced them.[3] Poor copy-editing lets down not only the reader, but the author, too.

3 See, for example, on p. 248: double listing of "Toubert, Pierre, 'The Carolingian Moment (8th–10th Century)', in *A History of the Family: Remote Worlds and Ancient Worlds*, ed. by Andre Burguire [sic] and others (Cambridge: Wiley, 1996), 379–406".

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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