

Learning and power in late antique Gaul: classical education and the end of Roman rule

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Review by

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Thanks to its long educational tradition and its reputation for pedagogical excellence, Gaul serves as an ideal experimental laboratory for studying the cultural transformations that education underwent in the Western world during Late Antiquity. Henri-Irénée Marrou's seminal work,[1] its sequel written by his student Pierre Riché,[2] and T.J. Haarhoff's study on schools in Gaul,[3] which serves as a logical starting point for this research, remain fundamental contributions. However, these 20th-century works offer an approach and conclusions that are no longer suited to understanding the evolution of classical schools in the Roman world. It was therefore certainly necessary to renew the study of "teaching and learning in Gaul in Late Antiquity." A new historiographical context has emerged since the 1970s, challenging a negative view of the evolution of the educational system in Late Antiquity, even though the notion of decline and decadence characteristic of Marrou's view had already been tempered by Riché. Prosopographical studies have shed light on the social status of grammarians and their prominent cultural role in the Roman world.[4] Although Ralph W. Mathisen argues that "secular" education continued in Gaul until the 7th century, regarding Desiderius of Cahors (580-655 CE) as the "last of the Romans,"[5] a careful reading of the original Latin sources shows that this conclusion is debatable. For example, Mamertus Claudianus, a priest in Vienne in the mid-5th century, cannot be identified as a professional teacher of Latin rhetoric.[6] Furthermore, the intellectual history of education in late antiquity as a whole has been reevaluated by Jan R. Stenger.[7] Finally, recent contributions, such as Eleanor Dickey's work on the *Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana*, have focused on monolingual and bilingual education in the eastern part of the Empire.[8]

Alison John's book offers a new interpretation of the history of classical education in late antiquity, focusing on Late Antique Gaul and linking education and power. She demonstrates that it was not the material changes brought about by the political, cultural, and religious upheavals of the 5th century that led to the decline of schools, but rather marked shifts in attitudes toward education and learning among the new holders of power in post-imperial Gaul: the barbarian kingdoms and the Church.

Following an introduction that outlines the sources, the study's objective, and the approaches adopted—including a clarification of terminology and a review the current state of the field, Chapter 1 (*Classical Education in the Late Roman World*) highlights the importance of classical education in society and politics and offers an analysis of the trends emerging from our sources regarding education in Gaul from the 4th to the early 6th century. It emphasizes education's function as a public institution and its role as a marker of identity and culture. To this end, a useful prosopographical list (included in Appendix 1) catalogs the teachers and students identifiable in sources from the 4th to the early 6th century in Gaul. This study shows that schools and teachers of rhetoric begin to disappear from our sources starting in the late 5th and early 6th centuries. This gradual decline should be interpreted as a sign that classical education was no longer a public institution as it had been under the Roman Empire, and that it no longer held a dominant position in politics, society, and culture. Avitus of Vienne, born around 470, clearly illustrates the changes undergone by Gallo-Roman aristocratic society. Although Avitus was related to Sidonius and corresponded with the latter's son, his classical education and interest in classical literary culture no longer appear clearly in his letters, as was the case with his Gallo-Roman predecessors or with his contemporary Ennodius of Pavia in Ostrogothic Italy. The decline in the presence of teachers and students in historical sources reflects the changing ideological and practical role of literary education among the Gallo-Romans in the post-Roman world. By the early 6th century, teachers of classical literature no longer held the privileged position once occupied by Ausonius or Sidonius, as the teaching of literature was no longer the foundation of public careers or political power and was no longer a fundamental element of aristocratic identity, as it was in the 4th century for Sidonius and his circle.

Chapter 2 (*The Cultural Ecosystem of Late Ancient Gaul*) aims to place classical education in Late Ancient Gaul within its historical and historiographical context. Political, military, religious, and cultural transformations influenced the Roman sociopolitical structures that had long formed the foundation of education in the Late Ancient West. Three themes are addressed: the role of Roman aristocrats in the survival and development of classical schools; the role of cities in the Roman Empire as centers of economic, administrative, and social life that allowed classical education to flourish; and the role of the Church in integrating classical education into its beliefs and practices. The Gallo-Romans gradually grew accustomed to living and working alongside the barbarians, who adopted many aspects of Roman administrative and legal structures. Daily life in the cities of Gaul changed little. Furthermore, the collapse of the Western Empire had little effect on the functioning of the Church. Consequently, the Gallo-Roman aristocrats continued to follow the traditional forms of literary education, which had hardly been profoundly altered by the crises of the 5th century. We must therefore look elsewhere for an explanation of the disappearance of schools in the historical sources of the late 5th and early 6th centuries.

Chapter 3 (*The Relationship Between Education and Power*) is devoted to the practical aspects of education, such as the organization and funding of schools, based on data drawn from legal codes and literary sources. The Theodosian Code contains several provisions relating to education, among which special attention is given to *CTh* 13.3.11, the edict of Gratian of May 23, 376, promulgated in Trier, and to *CTh* 14.9.3.1, promulgated in Constantinople in the name of Theodosius II (and Valentinian III) in 425. Gratian's school law (text and translation included in Appendix 2) concerns the remuneration, from imperial funds, of teachers of rhetoric and Greek and Latin grammar in the northern diocese of Gaul. On the other hand, *CTh* 14.9.3.1^[9] stipulates a staff of three rhetoricians and ten grammarians for Latin, five rhetoricians and ten grammarians for Greek, one professor of philosophy, and two professors of law. Among the literary sources from Gaul, Ausonius occupies a prominent place. He was a representative of professional teachers—grammarians and rhetoricians—and a creative literary figure of the period spanning from the Edict of Constantine to the Edict of Theodosius, having lived long enough to witness the tolerance and eventual establishment of Christianity under Roman rule. This study shows that it was not the imperial government, but rather cities and private individuals who played the most important role in organizing and financing classical education in late antiquity. Classical schools allowed well-educated young Romans to gain access to the circles of power. Knowledge of Virgil and Cicero could enable a person to be identified as a member of the elite. Since this educated elite held positions of power in the Roman Empire, belonging to this privileged caste could help one gain access to power. When those in power began to value other qualities—such as military skills in the case of the barbarian kingdoms and ascetic virtues within the Church—Roman standards of *paideia* and eloquence lost their importance within government and society.

Chapter 4 (*Education in Society and Culture*) focuses on the ideological aspects of classical education. Political and cultural changes in Gaul altered the way Gallo-Roman aristocrats practiced and perceived education. In the 4th century, classical education was closely linked to imperial power structures. During the 5th century, the Gallo-Romans used education to shape and assert their status and identity. Educational networks became closely intertwined with aristocratic literary circles. The political and social transformations in 5th-century Gaul and the anxieties of the Gallo-Roman aristocracy influenced educational practices and attitudes.

Chapter 5 (*Classical Education and the Church*) highlights the changes that occurred following the emergence of ecclesiastical schools in monasteries and episcopal households. The Church never consciously sought to compete with classical schools or to destroy classical literary culture. However, it did not teach classical grammar or rhetoric and did not require a high level of education for membership or promotion within its hierarchies. The cause of the marginalization of the traditional classical educational system and the disappearance of schools of grammar and rhetoric from

public life in the early 6th century must be sought in the emergence of new fields of study and new career opportunities within the clergy, alongside the rise of asceticism and monasticism.

This book, well documented and well produced, could have been supplemented with a chapter devoted to the role and function of Greek in the education and literary culture of Late Antique Gaul (even though Greek is mentioned in various places throughout the book).^[10] But John has devoted an article to this topic.^[11] As she relates, negative impressions regarding knowledge of Greek in the Western late antique world are not entirely justified. In late antique Gaul, interest in Greek persisted and its teaching continued. The sources available for 4th-century Gaul are the works of the Gallo-Roman grammarian and politician Ausonius, particularly the *Commemoratio professorum Burdigalensium*, which mentions several Greek language teachers, the legislation of the *Codex Theodosianus*, notably Gratian's edict of May 23, 376, and a late antique scholastic text, the *Colloquium Celtis*, a collection of bilingual Greek and Latin school dialogues from the 3rd century CE, similar to the *Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana*, and known thanks to a manuscript written by Conrad Celtes in Sponheim in 1495 (Vienna, Austrian National Library, Suppl. Gr. 43).^[12] To this we may add a letter from the priest Claudianus Mamertus,^[13] which offers a case study of the teaching practices of Sapaudus, a 5th-century Latin rhetorician in Vienna. Claudianus' letter to Sapaudus is striking for its many references to Greek.

Notes

^[1] Marrou, Henri-Irénée (1948 [1965⁶]). *Histoire de l'Éducation dans l'Antiquité*, Éditions du Seuil.

^[2] Riché, Pierre (1962 [1973³]), *Éducation et culture dans l'Occident barbare : VI^e et VIII^e siècle*, Éditions du Seuil.

^[3] Haarhoff, T.J. (1920 [1958²]). *Schools of Gaul: A Study of Pagan and Christian Education in the Last Century of the Western Empire*, Oxford University Press.

^[4] Kaster, Robert A. (1988). *Guardians of Language. The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity*. California University Press.

^[5] Mathisen, Ralph W. (2005). "Bishops, Barbarians, and the 'Dark Ages'. The Fate of Late Roman Educational Institutions in Late Antique Gaul". In: R.B. Begley and J.W. Koterski, eds., *Medieval Education*. Fordham University Press, 3-19 (9 and 12).

^[6] John, Alison (2022). "(Mis)identifying Teachers in Late Antique Gaul. Sidonius' *Ep.* 4.11, Mamertus Claudianus and Classical vs. Christian Education." *Mnemosyne*, Ser. 4, 75(6), 996-1020. DOI: 10.1163/1568525X-BJA10073.

[7] Stenger, Jan R. (2022), *Education in Late Antiquity: Challenges, Dynamism, and Reinterpretation, 300-550 CE*. Oxford University Press.

[8] See the synthesis work by Dickey, E. (2016), *Learning Latin the Ancient Way: Latin Textbooks from the Ancient World*, Cambridge University Press.

[9] Text and translation should have been included in Appendix 2.

[10] A entry “Greek” in the General Index would have been useful.

[11] John, Alison (2020). “Learning Greek in Late Antique Gaul.” *Classical Quarterly*, N. S., 70(2), 846-64. DOI: 10.1017/S0009838821000112.

[12] Dionisotti, Anna Carlotta (1982). “From Ausonius’ School Days ? A School Book and its Relatives.” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 72, 83-125. DOI: 10.2307/299118.

[13] *CSEL* (1885), 203-6 (Engelbrecht).