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# Late Antiquity: Then and Now

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## Abstract

Late Antiquity as a period has a complex history with moments when the issues pertaining to it seem to intensify. One of these was without a doubt the aftermath of World War I and reached its apex in 1923 during the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Brussels. The tragic events that had shaken Europe had a deep impact on historiography. In the aftermath of World War II, this trend was reversed on account of a progressive change of perspective and sensibility. In the last decades the favored epithets applied to Late Antiquity were “transformation”, “change”, “transition” and “evolution”. The idea of a “long” Late Antiquity has eventually superseded the previous discourse on when and why the Roman Empire declined. Instead of a caesura, the historical continuum, the *longue durée*, is stressed. The continuities between Christian Rome, Sasanian Iran, and Islam are being explored. Late Antiquity has become a popular subject of a historical research that is characterized by a wide variety of methods and a paradigm shift.

**Keywords:** Late Antiquity, historical periodizations, Byzantium, Islam, Persia

## 1. Historical periodizations

Nobody doubts the convenience and indeed necessity of historical periodizations nor the validity and usefulness of the well-established categories: (late) Antiquity, Early Middle Ages, Byzantium/East Rome, Sasanid Iran, and early Islam.

And we are all conscious that no handbook of ancient Roman history could now appear without including a chapter covering the period from the reign of Constantine to, say, the Arab conquest which was the rule until half a century ago.

It is enough to remind that the original edition of the Cambridge Ancient History (1923–1939) ended with 324, the date at which Constantine became sole emperor [1]. It thus neatly avoided having to cover the Christian Empire or even indeed the foundation of Constantinople. But the recently published volume of the CAH new edition takes the concept of “ancient history” as far as AD 600. The period we usually called Later Roman Empire or Late Antiquity has become enormously popular with professional historians and students alike [2].

### 1.1 Alois Riegl

We can be sure that when Alois Riegl “invented” Late Antiquity in his *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (*Late Roman Arts and Crafts*, 1901), his famous study of late Roman art, published exactly at the beginning of the last century, he could never have imagined how fertile would be his proposal of evaluation of late antique as an autonomous phase in history of art, rejecting the concept of decadence and decline. Riegl’s first major achievement, in his *Stilfragen* (*Problems of Style*) of

1893, had been the elucidation of how ornamental forms, especially vegetal motifs, evolved diachronically from Egypt, Greece, and Rome right through to the arabesque that Muslim builders so loved, against those who saw “die späte Antike” as a period of decline and barbarian disruption and ornament as somehow above—or rather beneath—historical analysis [3].

## **2. Late Antiquity and the end of the West Roman Empire**

While, from a modern perspective, this myth of monolithic continuity has been dismantled, it is another matter altogether to locate the consciousness of a break with Late Antiquity within Byzantine culture. Otto Seeck (1850–1921) aspired in his six-volume *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt* to introduce the reader to “the laws governing historical processes of formation and decline” (Seeck 1897–1920: vol. I, preface).

The thematically oriented chapters of the first few volumes were especially devoted to that objective: Seeck constructed an impressive scenario of decline that culminated in “the elimination of the best” (die Ausrottung der Besten: vol I., pp. 269–307) [4].

### **2.1 Social Darwinism**

In Seeck’s opinion the ancient world need not have come to an end. The collapse occurred when “inherited cowardice” and “moral weakening” had emerged as dominant characteristics of society. Seeck’s ideas were shaped by the evolutionary biology of the nineteenth century.

These theories are representative of the period as evolutionary biology turned into a paradigm of historical discovery. Seeck’s *Geschichte* can be understood only if one keeps in mind that a number of different, partly contradictory, theories were published, now usually classified as “social Darwinism.” These theories were combined with eugenic considerations, scientific reflections on population, racial deliberations, and ideas about social hygiene. He combined and adapted individual pieces of research he came across in biology and related sciences and transferred them to the history of Late Antiquity.

## **3. Decline of the West by Oswald Spengler**

Peculiar of Seeck’s account was a biological theory combined with a detailed event-oriented history based on a meticulous critical assessment of the sources. The fall of Rome was the obvious paradigm for the end of Europe’s global hegemony, a cyclical interpretation of history. Undoubtedly the most famous work of this sort was Oswald Spengler’s (1880–1936) *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918–1922), which was influenced by Seeck’s *Geschichte* as well as by the research of the *religions-geschichtliche Schule*. Spengler believed that Germany’s military defeat was a symptom of the defeat of Europe as a whole. His interpretation of world history was very simple: he assumed that according to a sort of natural law, every culture underwent three phases—development, prosperity, and decline. According to Spengler the Battle of Actium in 31 BC is the event that marked the end of antiquity. After that a sort of “intermediate period” of 1000 years came without any development, which he saw is characterized by a “magic” or “Arabian” culture [5].

According to Spengler this culture was still organized as it had been in antiquity; its nature was the product of a supposedly “oriental” influence. The crisis of the

period that we call Late Antiquity and the turmoil of the *Völkerwanderung* were consequences of the “ossification” of a once lively ancient culture—a process that had begun under Augustus [6]. This pseudoscientific theory of the decline of cultures could be used as an aid to the analysis of the politics present. It is remarkable that after the First World War, Spengler’s peculiar speculations were successful not only among sectors of the conservative and culturally pessimistic middle classes but also among some students of the ancient world. This can be explained with the feeling of a waning significance of their disciplines and a desire to restore to antiquity its historical significance.

#### 4. An integrated approach to Late Antiquity

An early modern historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam suggested the term “connected history” to describe the complex interchange between East and West in the age of the great discoveries [7]. A similar approach seems to be now fruitfully applied to Late Antiquity. The age of religious empires was also the age of great missionary movements: Christianity, Buddhism, and Manichaeism before Islam, which helped, each in its own way, to carry and transform *theologoumena* and rituals across Asia, along the Silk Road.

Although an outdated, isolationist approach to Late Antiquity primarily focusing on late Roman culture and society still dominates some quarters of the academy, many scholars have worked toward a more integrated and comparative approach to the period. The shifts have been gradual and partial. Today there are numerous scholars of rabbinics who explore the wider context of the Babylonian Talmud in Sasanian society; there has lately been a resurgence of interest in the history of the Red Sea region, including Ethiopia and the Yemen, in the centuries leading up to the rise of Islam; and over the last 10 years or so, we have seen significant interest in the literary and religious parallels to the Qur’an found in Syriac Christian literature in particular.

#### 5. The religious question

One fundamental characteristic of this period is the blurring of the boundaries between the secular and the spiritual. Discourses ultimately religious in their origin shaped both state and society in Late Antiquity. The ascetic overtones that pervaded exhortations by both legislators and preachers were peculiar. But the influence went both ways. Secular models of legitimacy could be described with the application of the classical category of “tyranny” even for the abuses of power by Christian bishops. It is remarkable how ecclesiastical writers could draw upon an ancient moral vocabulary of virtues and vices to define the proper scope and exercise of ecclesiastical power. In a way episcopacy seems to be caught between spiritual and worldly imperatives. The relationship between Church and state and the nature of the Church itself were disputed: there was an ongoing struggle to define the proper boundaries between the spiritual and the worldly. Both kings and bishops exerted power: over souls (the bishop) and secular and ecclesiastical affairs (the king). The king was tasked with the protection of his people through war and religious guidance, which entailed converting the subjects, sometimes by force, convening councils of bishops, and influencing their agendas. Christianity was used as a more complex, useful, and efficient tool for monarchic legitimacy.

## 6. Late Antiquity and Byzantium

It may be not a paradox to claim that there never was a Byzantine Late Antiquity. A continuous and relatively unchanged Christian empire from the fourth century through to the fifteenth century can be regarded as a sort of a myth fundamental for Byzantium, as it has been fundamental for Byzantine Studies as well. In any case the distinction between “Late Antiquity” and “Byzantium” is hardly ever made in the first grand narratives of Byzantine historiography and historiography about Byzantium, *The Empire That Would Not Die* [8].

## 7. Byzantium: the New Rome

Within a century after Constantine’s refoundation, his “New Rome” of Constantinople became a great imperial capital which could create a new focus for political, cultural, and economic activities in the eastern Mediterranean and beyond. The efforts of Theodosius I to create an emphasis on Constantinople as a great dynastic imperial city have been highlighted recently by scholars, noting that his exertions in this direction included the enhancement of the *Apostoleion* site. Theodosius went to considerable lengths to populate the *Apostoleion* with imperial tombs [9]. The “Greek Roman Empire” enjoyed prosperity and cultural and religious cohesion. In the sixth century, there was even a program of reconquest of several of the western provinces launched by Justinian. By the end of his reign, however, the Byzantine Empire began to suffer heavy decline, with the loss of its southern provinces, first to Sasanian Persia and then to Muslim Arabs. All of these events culminated into a period known as the “seventh-century crisis” [10].

Late Antiquity saw the development of a new style of imperial authority in Byzantium, now expressed in explicitly Christian terms. Christianity affects everything from literary production to patterns of civic life. In Byzantine rhetoric, the emperor upholds equity and order on behalf of Christ. Distinctive Christian cultures flourished in the southern and eastern provinces of the empire, and beyond, both in independent states (like Armenia) and under Sasanian or Arab rule. These communities adopted indigenous languages, such as Syriac, Armenian, and Coptic. Creativity and dynamism are remarkable with which this complex society responded to challenges and change.

## 8. The Sasanian Empire

The Sasanian Empire (226–651), which succeeded to the Parthian Empire, ruled Iran–Iraq and surrounding regions. At its greatest extent, it included parts of Southeast Asia, Armenia, and—for a short period in the early seventh century—even Egypt and greater Syria. As a formidable world power, in the east it extended to the Indus River and in the west to the upper Tigris and Euphrates river valleys. Sasanian culture and civilization benefited from a great international trade network, and Sasanian culture and civilization benefited accordingly. The reigns of Shapur II (309–379) and Khusraw I (531–579) are generally acknowledged as being high points of political stability and cultural achievement. The Sasanian Empire has been credited by modern historians with having a bureaucratic centralization with provincial officials directly responsible to the throne, and roads, city building, and even agriculture were financed by the government. The Sasanians are seen as reviving the spirit and traditions of the great Achaemenid rulers (of 559–330 BCE). Sasanian administrative and political traditions are now also regarded as a formative

influence on the Islamic empire of the Abbasids (750–1258 CE). The Sasanian empire played also an important role in the development of late antique religions, as it was in fact a vast and diverse empire of many traditions existing in a coherent, if not always harmonious, system.

Although the official religion of the State was Zoroastrianism, Christians, Jews, and Buddhists were generally tolerated and contributed openly to Sasanian society: Christians were influential administrators in the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon, while Jews could produce the Babylonian Talmud transferring Judaism's center of gravity from Palestine to Iraq for centuries to come [11].

### 8.1 The eastern frontier

Sasanid Persia, stretching deep into central Asia, was often beleaguered by problems on its frontiers. Romano-Persian relations were played out in a broader geographical arena. For instance, the long succession of wars fought between the emperor Constantius II (AD 337–361) and Shah Shapur II (AD 309–379) involved not only conflict in northern Mesopotamia frontier but also diplomatic exchanges with polities in other regions such as Himyar in southern Arabia and Axum in the Ethiopian highlands. Shapur launched also a series of punitive expeditions into the Arabian peninsula. Such interactions are a proof that the Mediterranean world of Late Antiquity was part of a larger cultural and economic zone.

### 8.2 A permeable frontier zone

In spite of long periods of warfare between Romans and Sasanians, these did not isolate the two Empires from each other. There was also a considerable amount of peaceful interaction and forms of acculturation. This interaction was greatly helped by the fact that Mesopotamia constituted a permeable border zone without a fixed boundary similar to other border regions such as those on the Rhine and Danube. Exchange of knowledge and goods, which took place on a regular basis, was facilitated by the fact that there was a culture shared in common on both sides of the frontier and that Syriac, a dialect of the Middle Aramaic language, was the *lingua franca*. Ammianus Marcellinus' story about Antoninus (*Res Gestae* 18. 5) is a good example of the peculiar character of the border regions. Antoninus had been a merchant and an accountant in the service of the Roman military commander of Mesopotamia, who defected to the Persians with information on Roman military dispositions. He was able to even pursue a career in the service of the Persian king. Antoninus was not a unique case. According to Ammianus (19. 9. 3–8), Cragausius, a prominent member of the elite of Nisibis, also went over to the Persian side. Antoninus and Cragausius are two good examples of the social relations that characterized this frontier zone between the two empires where economic, diplomatic, cultural, and intellectual concerns were diverse but economic interchange took place on a regular, though restricted, basis [12].

## 9. Dynamic exchanges

The Roman emperor and his Persian counterpart respected each other, as appears, for instance, from correspondence between Constantius II and Shapur II in which they address each other as “brother” and Constantius even offers Shapur his friendship (Amm. Marc. 17. 5. 3–14). This can be regarded not as empty politeness but a mutual recognition of sovereignty and equal rank as well as a clear wish for good relations and dialog. The accepted equality between the Roman and the

Sasanian Empire becomes a reality in spite of the affirmed primacy of the Christian Roman Empire. At the same time, the expansion of Christendom allowed a greater assertion of Christian universality with the integration of a number of peripheral regions through the expansion of Christianity such as in Ireland and Ethiopia and the diffusion of factors of Hellenistic origin in the Arabian peninsula.

## **10. The Jews in Late Antiquity: a new history**

The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple at the end of the Jewish revolt of AD 66–70 plays a major role in the development of Jewish religion in Late Antiquity. Jews never lost the desire to see the rebuilding of the Temple, but by the third century, they were beginning to find other ways to worship, and by the end of Late Antiquity, rabbinic Judaism, the normative form of Judaism, was well established.

Jews had been expelled from Jerusalem after the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 CE, when the new province of “Syria Palaestina” was established by the merger of Roman Syria and Roma Judaea. Nonetheless Jews continued to live in the land of Israel in large numbers during this period, and many in a diaspora scattered both in many parts of the Mediterranean world and in Babylonia. In spite of the hostility to Rome for the destruction of the Temple, Jews within the Roman and Byzantine empires integrated into mainstream culture even if Christianization of the empire and the adoption of Palestina as a Christian Holy Land relegated Jews to a marginal position. Their situation was different in Babylonia, where, under Sasanian rule, Jews obtained a great deal of independence [13]. Jewish life within the Christianizing Roman Empire of Late Antiquity depended largely on the particular interaction of three microforces: their community, the local Christian community, and the presence of imperial representatives. As several scholars have noted, synagogues served as local municipal buildings that facilitated quotidian interactions between Jews, Christian, and other local residents, ranging from business and civic matters to more mundane contacts [14].

### **10.1 A new picture**

Scholarly assessment of late antique Judaism has experienced a series of profound shifts over the past three decades. As Judaism and, later still, Christianity began to infiltrate the Greek mind, it was tempting to wonder whether Abrahamism and Hellenism could possibly be connected, for better or for worse. The second-century CE Syrian Numenius called his admired Plato an “Atticizing Moses,” in other words “Moses speaking Attic Greek” [15]. There is a revised portrait that has emerged of the structures of Jewish communal authority in the High and Later Roman Imperial periods. Until recently it was generally thought that the priestly leadership of Second Temple period Jewish society vanished in 70 CE, as the priests were supposed to have given way to an emergent rabbinic elite, which already in the second century assumed more or less uncontested control over Jewish social and religious institutions.

This picture has been revised. Scholars are now inclined to regard apocalyp-  
tists, prayer leaders, and powerful citizens as rivals of the parvenu rabbis [16]. Groups of Greek-speaking Jews have been seen populating cities throughout the Roman Empire filling the non-rabbinic synagogues. The presumed enduring oral (Pharisaic) traditions are now regarded as polemical interventions which are to be connected to the seams between Judaism and Christianity. The rabbis themselves are described as a minority group whose arguments are important only for the members of the group itself. A story of perpetual rabbinic marginality has replaced the hegemonic rabbinism of older accounts [17].

It must be taken into account how the far-reaching shifts of the last 25 years have to do not only with the new approach to the data of early Judaism but also with the quantity, range, and nature of the data themselves. New archeological finds and new inscriptional evidence have produced a very different empirical landscape.

## 10.2 A wider context

Already by the middle of the fifth century, any assertion of unity of the empire can be regarded as optimistic. There were tensions between cohesion and fragmentation which are to be taken into account to avoid a simplistic account of the events that constitute the traditional grand narrative of Late Antiquity, in which the Roman Empire is dismembered by foreign invaders.

All of these developments point to a recognition that the various cultures and literatures of Late Antiquity cannot be viewed in isolation but rather must be approached in the wider context of the dynamic exchanges between various communities in the period, the imperial competition between the Romans and the Sasanians, and the spread and consolidation of the monotheistic or “Abrahamic” traditions. I would like to add that the Dome of the Rock, built by the second caliph of the Marwanid dynasty Abd-al-Malik (the Haram of Jerusalem), had the goal to show the authenticity of the Muslim faith and its identity with the faith of David and Solomon, the newness and distorting character of the Christian faith. The idea underlying the inscription in the Dome of the Rock is that God is one and that Muhammad was a prophet and Christ like him is only a prophet and only a man and not the son of God [18]. Abd-al-Malik shows his will and power to use the enormous resources of Byzantine skill and experience to promote the Muslim cause. This is the Marwanid claim of building a Muslim Byzantine society shaped and led by the Muslim, incorporating the heritage of the Byzantine subjects. There is a point that I would like to stress and that I am taking from Averil Cameron: the commonly used terminology that distinguishes between the Byzantine and the early Islamic period is unhelpful, and the majority of scholars both on Late Antiquity and early Islam now prefer the term Late Antiquity; if there is a conclusion to be drawn from recent scholarship on Late Antique Near East, it is that there was no such clear-cut chronological division [19].

Now, I would like to devote my attention to two scholars who have contributed in a peculiar way to an original reinterpretation of Late Antiquity.

## 11. AHM Jones

A new phase, not only in the English-speaking world, in the study of Later Antiquity began in 1964. In this year, after having studied the period for many years, Jones published his three-volume work *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602: A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey* which begins with the reign of Diocletian and ends with that of the Byzantine emperor Maurice. This work, with its almost total reliance on literary and epigraphic primary sources, still provides the most reliable general account of the epoch as Jones possessed an extensive knowledge of the sources. Jones distanced himself from monocausal attempts at explanation and examined a number of interacting factors that had, in his opinion, caused the decline of the Roman Empire. Jones also contributed to overcome the popular notion that the late empire was governed by coercion and despotism. He took into account the crisis of the economy and the tax burden, the decrease in population and the shortage of workers and the bureaucratization of the administration, the barbarization of the army, and the invasions by the Germanic tribes. In his opinion

it was “the increasing pressure of the barbarians, concentrated on the weaker western half of the empire, which caused the collapse.” He concludes “that the simple but rather unfashionable view that the barbarians played a considerable part in the decline and fall of the empire may have some truth” [20].

## **12. Peter Brown: how Late Antiquity became “long”**

Peter Brown, who had previously become well known for his biography of Augustine (1967), published in 1971 a seminal book, *The World of Late Antiquity: from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad*. He took into account the accomplishments of more recent English and French works and both anthropological research (such as that of Edward Evans-Pritchard and Mary Douglas) and the historiography of the Annales school (exemplified not least by Evelyne Patlagean). This work has a great impact on the way Late Antiquity was perceived on both sides of the Atlantic. Brown’s Late Antiquity extended from the third to the seventh century and embraced both the western provinces of the Roman Empire and Sasanian Iran. It is, however, not only in the English-speaking world that Late Antiquity has become a popular subject of a historical research that is characterized by a wide variety of methods and a paradigm shift. *The World of Late Antiquity* described Late Antiquity as a long-lasting phenomenon (200–800 AD) framed on the one hand by the progressive Romanization of the Roman Empire and on the other by that of its Islamization. The dissolution of the ancient Mediterranean world led to the creation of three civilizations, all equal heirs of antiquity: western Europe, Byzantium, and Islam. This conception, which has deserved the name of “Brownian model,” was accompanied by the positive depiction of a period that was altogether creative. Later, in *The Making of Late Antiquity* (1978), Brown proposed defining Late Antiquity by its religious and cultural themes, in their relation to the social evolutions at the heart of the Mediterranean world. As a consequence Late Antiquity was conceived as encompassing a vaster area, combining the Roman and Sasanian territories (and later the Umayyad), even if it preserved not only its *longue durée* (250–800) and the central themes defining it (Hellenism, Christianity, Islam) but also the positive judgment it now carried.

This development has contributed over the past decades to what Andrea Giardina has described as a general “explosion” in late antique studies [21], “explosion” which, I suppose, means the abandonment of earlier historical models and grand narratives and, at the same time, the introduction of new interpretative frameworks and the opportunity for refining our established assumptions and approaches. The research into a “long” Late Antiquity has for the most part superseded the previous discourse on when and why the Roman Empire declined. Transformation, change, transition, and evolution are the favored epithets to apply to the epoch. Instead of a caesura, the historical continuum, the *longue durée*, is stressed [22]. There has been a fruitful cooperation between various disciplines: sociological, anthropological, and gender-focused methodologies have successfully been applied to Late Antiquity [23].

## **13. Garth Fowden or how Late Antiquity becomes broad**

Among the scholars who sought to adopt, refine, and develop Brown’s approach to the period, it was Garth Fowden—currently Sultan Qaboos, Professor of Abrahamic Faiths at Cambridge—who produced what was perhaps the most important work in this area in the 1990s: *From Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*. It is a work which impacted many scholars

profoundly. The book is ambitious in scope, wildly imaginative, and willing to explore the period in terrifyingly broad terms but in pursuit of a single cogent thesis: that the entire history of the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean from the second through the ninth century CE can be understood in terms of a sequence of imperial projects aiming to establish God's rule on earth, that is, the unifying theme of the era, one that distinguishes it from the civilization of the ancient world and sets the stage for the medieval cultures of Byzantium, Western Christendom, and the *Dār al-Islām*, and the use of monotheism as the primary justification for state building, for literally global dominion (as far as that was possible in the pre-modern world). In Fowden's work, the use of religion to justify imperial authority becomes the thread that links Christian Rome, Sasanian Iran, and the caliphates and that allows us to see the significant continuities between them with clarity.

Fowden, in his last book, *Before and after Muhammad* (2014; the first chapter is entitled *Including Islam*), once again seeks to explore the overarching continuities between Christian Rome, Sasanian Iran, and Islam but with even more attention paid to the intertwining discourses that link Greco-Roman, Syrian Christian, Jewish, Arab, Iranian, and European cultures over the course of a thousand years, centering on what he now calls the "Eurasian hinge" of southwest Asia linking the civilizations of the region. Fowden anchors his work in a rigorous interrogation of older conceptions of Late Antiquity, criticizing previous scholars' poor integration of Islam into the period, as well as the common approach of only including the Umayyad caliphate as a late antique empire. This serves to truncate the early medieval period from older trajectories of development that arguably only reached their full fruition around the year 1000. It also artificially severs the Abbasids and Iranian Islam from the prevailing cultural patterns of the Arab-Islamic world, though they are equally rooted in the legacies of biblical monotheism and Hellenism. I would like to mention at least the book which has recently been published by Glen Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam*. Bowersock has written: "The formation of the vessel that Muhammad bequeathed to the world under the name of Islam took place in a crucible" [24].

## 14. A new great empire

While Late Antiquity witnessed both the collapse of Roman and Sasanian rule and the dismemberment of much of Byzantium, it also saw the birth and spectacular growth of what was the greatest Near Eastern empire since the Achaemenids and arguably the greatest empire ever produced in southwest Asia. For the first and only time in history, lands irrigated by the Guadalquivir, Nile, and Oxus rivers were producing revenues for a single polity, the Umayyad caliphate, which, by the second decade of the eighth century, stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to Central Asia. The Umayyads had assembled an empire considerably larger than that of the Romans (at its greatest extent) in about a third the time. What is more, seventh- and eighth-century Muslims also produced the last of the great religious and cultural movements of Antiquity. Islam was initially the faith of the caliphate's Arab rulers, and Arabic was initially the language of the elite; but over the next three or four centuries, Islam was transformed into the majority religion of the empire, while Arabic (and then arabicised Persian) became the languages of empire, culture, and learning, as well as the *lingua franca* of the Arab Near and Middle East. Finishing a job first started by Constantine three centuries earlier, Muslims thus fused and transformed religious ideas from a wide variety of religious traditions (especially Jewish, Christian, and Manichaean) and cultural backgrounds (Arabian, Byzantine, and Sasanian), generating a religion and culture during the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries that were distinctively their own [25].

## **15. The rise of Islam**

The rise of Islam turned first the late antique Near East and then the whole Mediterranean world inside out. Over a period of a few hundred years, Islam spread from its place of origin in the Arabian Peninsula all the way to modern Spain in the west and northern India. Rome and Sasanian Iran, who had faced one another across the “Fertile Crescent” of Syria and Mesopotamia for 400 years, were defeated in two decades of campaigning by Arab tribesmen in the AD 630s and 640s. The Byzantine Empire went on to lose all its African and Asian territories except Anatolia, while the Sasanian Empire was completely destroyed. Christianity, which had long been established as the religion of the Roman Empire and had been gaining ground in Iran, became the faith of a subject people, superseded by a new, Arabic revelation. Syria and Mesopotamia, which had been so far divided by the frontier between the Roman and Byzantine Empire, became, from the AD 660s, the heartland of the new empire. It was here that the palaces and cities of the caliphs were founded, far from the new frontiers in Anatolia, North Africa, and Transoxiana.

### **15.1 Islam’s origins**

Christianity was spreading along the coast of the Persian Gulf and was the religion of Ethiopia, across Mecca the Red Sea to the west. Mecca, the holy city of the religion founded by Muhammad, was very important to the people of the Arabian Peninsula. It was a city along many trade routes and may have played a role in the flow of goods and ideas between the trade systems of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. It must be kept in mind that the Arabic sources preserve little evidence for the seventh-century nature of Islam and that even the Qur’an itself was produced not in seventh-century Arabia but in Mesopotamia during the eighth and ninth centuries.

### **15.2 Qur’an**

The Qur’an is a religious prescription, not a narrative history; but, as a text supposed to be contemporaneous with the life of Muhammad, it can provide evidence about the polemical religious environment in which he was preaching. In any case we must beware of mistaking rhetoric for reality and reconstructing history from it too literally. Furthermore, the exegesis that we might try to use to interpret it was produced over a century later in a milieu far removed from that of the Qur’an’s origins. Nonetheless from the Qur’an, Muhammad appears to have been engaged in polemical argument with Jews and Christians, among others, and he saw himself as a reformer, in the tradition of the Jewish prophets and of Jesus. Muhammad’s teaching seems part of the religious tradition of the late antique world [26].

## **16. Late Antiquity: epoche of revolution and adaptation of different mentalities**

Late Antiquity was an *epoche* of important transformation and of the adaptation of different mentalities. What we see is the transition from a political, classical, uncontested model of Roman hegemony to a religious, Christian, contested model of Roman supremacy. In the third century, identity was still primarily political (the principal affiliation being either civic or ethnic). Four centuries later in the seventh century identity became above all religious as the principal affiliation depended on

one's religious community. Late Antiquity was a historical period in which the two conceptions coexisted and in which the second overcame the first within the empire of Constantinople, the kingdoms of the West, the Sasanian empire, and the Qur'ān with "the people of the book." This transition can be explained by the fact that the notion of religion had changed, insisting more on soteriology and history [27]. The main consequence was that the notion of "civilized" was redefined: the ancient political criteria, which permitted the inclusion of the Sasanian empire, were replaced by the new Christian religious criteria, which justified the inclusion of converted peoples, even those who were barbarians.

## 17. Final remarks

Many scholars have been invited in these last decades to reflect on questions of ethnicity and identity. It seems possible to say that the analysis of ancient mentalities strengthens the idea of a real Late Antiquity within an expanded geographical framework and is also an argument in favor of a long but also of a short chronology.

Maybe Jesus Hernandez Lobato is right writing "Late Antiquity is hot" [28].

Also Marco Formisano is possibly right, who has written in the same book: "Reading Late Antiquity means reading another antiquity, perhaps an allegory of antiquity, which breaks the euhronical representation of historical development by introducing a disruptive *Ursprung* (origin) (he is referring to Walter Benjamin's, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* of 1925) into it" [29].

What seems undisputable is that the new idea of Late Antiquity implies overcoming both the conception of classical antiquity as representative of stable cultural values and narrative, especially political narrative, which is probably irreconcilable with what the "fluidity" inherent to what nowadays Late Antiquity means for us.

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