

Summary of a Conference:

Integration and Diversity in the Culture and Religions of Late Antiquity

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, May 21-24, 2009

In May 2009, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville hosted the inaugural conference of the newly established *International Network for the Study of Late Antiquity (ILAN)*. *ILAN* aims at creating a platform for junior and senior historians, archaeologists, and philologists working in the field of Late Antiquity who wish to broaden their view of the period across subject boundaries and differing academic cultures and approaches. To accomplish this goal, *ILAN* will, on a regular basis, offer interdisciplinary and international workshops on current issues in Late Antique cultural history. *ILAN* is open to everyone working in the field of Late Antiquity, and there are no other requirements for participation.

The need for this sort of international platform for discussion has been felt by a group of American and German scholars on a number of grounds. The study of Late Antiquity continues to boom to such an extent that it is hardly possible for specialists to keep pace with scholarship in a field that comprises such diverse disciplines as Ancient History, Early Medieval Archaeology, and Patristic Studies and also covers a period running from AD 300 to 800. New cultural-historical approaches, while broadening the scope of questions addressed by students of Late Antiquity, have further exacerbated that problem and have also tended to accentuate traditional differences between the academic cultures and scholarly approaches of many continental European countries and those of Anglo-American academia. *ILAN* was founded to address these problems, providing an organizational basis for a regular series of workshops whose principal aim is to enable researchers from all disciplines working in the field of Late Antiquity to get in touch with current research, both specific results and broad trends, in the relevant subjects and across differing academic cultures. Accordingly, *ILAN* workshops concentrate on providing overviews of current research accessible to the non-specialist professional, along with discussions of important upcoming questions in various relevant fields. Rather than providing the forum for further detailed studies, *ILAN* workshops aim to stimulate discussion and provide syntheses across subject boundaries and differing schools and methods. The network particularly encourages graduate students and young researchers to actively take part in that exchange. The majority of papers at the network's conferences are being given by young researchers, and graduate students are invited to present their work on posters during the conferences. The network also provides travel grants for graduate students.

For its initial period of three years, the network determined to address a broad theme reflecting recent developments and challenges in the study of Late Antiquity which is summarized in the network's title: "Centralisation and Particularism in Late Antiquity". Centralisation and particularism are features whose sharp contrast characterises the social and cultural history of Late Antiquity as much or more than they do many other periods in history: We encounter unifying tendencies in the religious policy of the powerful versus a ever increasing variety of persistent heterodoxies, a centralised state on the one hand and cultural regionalisms on the other, economic prosperity of certain regions as opposed to undeniable decline in others. But centralisation and particularism are also categories of interpretation which have a long history in scholarly analyses of the period and have in fact profoundly prejudiced historical research. Long into the twentieth century, research in the social and political history of the Late Roman Empire tended to apply global models of interpretation to the period and thereby, for instance, constructed the picture of a centralised state and society in decline with which we are all too familiar. Similar global models of integration and disintegration prevailed in economic history, the history of the material culture and other areas. When, in recent decades, scholars emphatically deconstructed such notions and demonstrated the cultural variety and vitality of the period in almost every aspect of its political, religious, social and economic life, a new picture of Late Antiquity emerged which was characterised by a diverse, and indeed often diffuse and bewildering, variety: Late Antiquity became a multiple history of differing regions, towns, social groups, cultural layers etc.

Yet the problem remains of how to relate this particularistic picture to overall historical developments and to integrative and centralising aspects of the era which cannot be dismissed altogether. The debate about these questions still produces very divergent pictures of the period and now more than ever seems to demand a comprehensive evaluation. It is the intention of the network to explore that tension in its first series of workshops in terms of material culture, the economy, social structures, political organisation, law, religion etc. from as many perspectives as possible. The range of questions which will be addressed in these first three years include the question of the economic disintegration of the Mediterranean; the unity and division of the Church, and the tension between the social and political "globalization" of the time and the newly emerging cultural regionalisms (all in Heidelberg/Frankfurt 2010); the political system of the Late Roman Empire, with particular emphasis on the relationship between centralising tendencies and local powers; and the disintegration of the empire into

autonomous political entities, their perception by and impact on the population, and their relation with the Empire (both at the Penn State conference in 2011).

The inaugural conference in Knoxville 2009 was devoted to another key aspect of the overall theme of centralisation and particularism: the history of Late Antique elites. The topic had always been central to the understanding of Late Antiquity: The history of the municipal elites, for example, as well as that of the pagan Roman aristocracy served earlier scholarship as an important argument for the picture of decline and fall, while the new elites of bureaucrats and bishops stood for all the vices of the Late Roman state which, allegedly, led to its downfall. Few other areas, on the other hand, have experienced a more radical change of scholarly approach and evaluation over the last decades. At Knoxville, five areas in particular were explored: (1) The transformations in the composition and formation of the traditional local and imperial elites; (2) the changing media of elite representation; (3) elite identities between barbarian and Roman; and (4) Christianization and the elites.

Section One

John Matthews' public lecture introduced a broad public to one of the characteristic forms of late antique composition, that of the list, whether as *notitia*, *itineraria*, or *laterculus*. Michael Kulikowski's opening address, "Master Narratives of Late Antiquity: Centralization, Particularism and the Historiography of the Later Roman Empire," provided some of the historical background to this taste, the equestrianization of government that characterized the transition from the Trajano-Hadrianic and Antonine model of government to the universalizing and professional outlook of the Severan period. Fabian Goldbeck, speaking on "Current Concepts for the Study of Elites," offered a socio-analytical approach to the problem, drawing on conceptual models used in the social sciences to address the constitution and self-reproduction of elites and the various bases on which their status can rest. A different approach to the late ancient elite was provided in a paper entitled "Symmachus and the Mysterious Case of the Number Seven: Constructing Elite Identity" by Michele Salzman (UC Riverside) which offered a case study to show how literary *paideia* was used for the construction of identity in the Late Roman senatorial elite. Salzman argued that, in the later fourth century, senatorial circles in the city of Rome developed a strong interest in Varro and his traditional historical theology which is, for example, visible in the fact that Symmachus originally intended to publish his correspondence in seven books modelled on Varro's *Hebdomades*. Interest in Varro as well as a particular concern for the meanings of the number

Seven, which can also be traced elsewhere, thus became a means to articulate a distinctively traditionalist and non-Christian identity of the late Roman pagan aristocracy.

Section 2

A second focus of debate during the conference was the disappearance or transformation of many modes and media of representation to which we are accustomed from the Hellenistic and high imperial period alongside the creation of new ones. The problem of how that change of media shapes our understanding of the social and cultural history of late Roman elites was addressed in “Changing Spaces and Media of Elite Representation in Late Antiquity,” by Christian Witschel (Heidelberg). Drawing largely but not exclusively on Western material, Witschel chose four exemplary areas in which such changes occur and bias modern interpretations. Although honorific inscriptions and statues, for example, generally decreased in number from the third century onwards, closer investigation reveals strong regional differences in their use: A comparison between Northern and Southern Italy in the fourth and fifth centuries, for instance, shows that certain regions in Southern Italy retained the habit of using inscriptions and statues for elites representation, while this does not apply to most of the North. Such marked distinctions cannot be explained simply by the accident of survival. They instead show the need to reckon with strong regional habits in the deployment of traditional modes of elite representation. Something similar is true for the transformation of civic spaces. While in a number of cities the *forum* was abandoned in Late Antiquity, even when there was no significant decrease in population, in Italy and Gaul *fora* seem to have been largely preserved as public spaces and *lieux de memoire* of the civic community, continuing to serve as a theatre for elite representation. In others cities, e.g. Ephesos, however, the main streets were now used as areas of representation rather than the *forum*. Church building also provided new impetus to the field of elite representation, in that it shifted euergetic activities to new locations within the urban landscapes and was often not commemorated in durable media. Ephemeral practices in celebrating and commemorating euergetic activities, e.g. through acclamations, may have gained in general importance during this period and therefore also distort our picture of Late Antique elite representation.¹ Such changes and discrepancies, taken together, seem to imply diverging strategies and spaces for the display of social

¹ See also B. Borg / C. Witschel: Veränderungen im Repräsentationsverhalten der römischen Eliten während des 3. Jhs. n. Chr., in: G. Alföldy - S. Panciera (Hrsg.), *Inchriftliche Denkmäler als Medien der Selbstdarstellung in der römischen Welt*, Stuttgart 2001, 47-120.

distinction rather than a decline in civic spirit and euergetism, as Liebeschuetz among others has argued.²

Traditionally, another central space of elite representation was the aristocratic *domus*. Its importance in that respect, it has been argued, may actually have increased in the late Roman period when civic functions were increasingly transferred from the public into the private premises of aristocratic office-holders.³ This view is confirmed by the archaeological remains of lavish private housing as well as by late Roman authors like Ammianus who repeatedly refer to domestic architecture and elite representation in domestic contexts. However, both the reality and the literary reflection of such practices seems to have vanished, according to the prevailing view, when the Roman empire in the West was replaced by Germanic kingdoms whose elites did not define themselves through civic offices anymore and therefore had no need for the accustomed ways of domestic representation. Julia Hillner's (Sheffield) paper on "Domestic Space between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages" questioned that notion by showing that Gregory of Tours does still devote close attention to household affairs of the Merovingian nobility. It is not, however, the domestic décor and ceremonial use of space that interests him but how members of the elite behaved and applied the moral codes of Christianity in private contexts. According to Hillner, domestic space therefore continued to be a matter of importance and concern also for the post-Roman elites – if, however, not in terms of civic representation but with regard to their Christian identity and self-display.

While Witschel and Hillner concentrated on provincial elites, John Weisweiler (Cambridge, UK) focussed in his paper ("Aristocratic Competition and Refusal of Office in Late-Antique Rome") on the Late Roman senatorial aristocracy. Weisweiler set out from the paradox that the refusal of office is a repeated topos of the period and, in fact, an ideological stance in the correspondence of Symmachus, who himself, like all his peers, was eager to make a career in the imperial administration. A similar paradox characterises Late Roman senatorial representation in the city of Rome. While senatorial families massively engaged in public building, lavishly financed games, advertised their civic achievements on inscriptions and boasted in other forms of self-display to a degree that had hitherto, in the presence of the emperor, been impossible, concerns were voiced about the ruinous effects of that thriving ambition on the maintenance and cohesion of the senatorial order. The refusal of office-

² John H. W. G Liebeschuetz, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City*, 2001.

³ See e.g. S. Ellis, "Power, Architecture and Décor: How the Late Roman Aristocrat Appeared to his Guests", in E. Gazda (ed.), *Roman Art in the Private Sphere. New Perspectives on the Architecture and Décor of the Domus, Villa and Insula*, Ann Arbor 1991, 117-34.

holding is, as Weisweiler argued, best explained along these lines: By ostentatiously showing reluctance towards public office, successful senatorial politicians tactfully played down their achievements and thereby contributed to the preservation of unity in an aristocratic society which was increasingly endangered by growing political and energetic competition.

Section 3

The question of Roman and barbarian identity in late antiquity has received extensive treatment in recent scholarship and several papers in Knoxville attempted to address the differences between Roman and barbarian at the level of the elite. Philipp von Rummel (DAI-Rom), in “Barbarians as Roman Elite: the Problem of Perspective” suggested that at every level, from dress to behaviour to social outlook, the difficulty in distinguishing Roman from barbarian is largely a matter of modern perspective as superimposed on ancient sources, which do not distinguish between Roman and barbarian elites in the same manner that they do between Roman and barbarian more generically. Roland Steinacher (Vienna) took a similar tack in “Military Elites, Romans or Barbarians?”, in which he stressed the overlap of styles of self-representation and indeed description by external witnesses of men whom scholars have traditionally separated into Roman and barbarian categories. Finally, Sebastian Gairhos (Augsburg), in “Raetia as Case Study for Changes and New Elite Identities,” demonstrated how on the basis of archaeology one can observe the creation of new elite styles of habitation and dress as the old frontier lines and urban road network of imperial Raetia broke down during the later fourth and especially the fifth centuries.

Section 4

The advent of Christianity undoubtedly proved a major challenge for the internal cohesion of the traditional local and imperial elites. Something similar is true for the relationship between local elites and the empire when conflicts over religion and orthodoxy emerged. On the other hand, Christianity could have integrating effects on the composition and identity of the elites, as a number of contributions clearly show (see Payne and Trampedach below). Accordingly, a main question for the conference was to assess the disintegrative or integrating effects Christianity had on the composition and cohesion of Late Antique elites. Two papers outlined the historical framework of the problem by re-examining the chronology of the christianization process. While in many regions Christianity undoubtedly had a strong basis already in the earlier fourth century, there is good reason to doubt prevailing similar views for other regions of the empire. In Spain, for example, Judith Végh outlined the very scant evidence for traditional views of the early Christianization of the peninsula, and especially for

its linkage to North Africa, an argument that must be based largely on archaeological evidence of which there is a great deal.

Another case study for the christianisation of marginal regions was provided by Roland Prien, Heidelberg (“The Case of Early Christianity in the Northwestern Provinces: Archaeological Evidence versus Written Sources“). Occasional references in written sources from the earlier fourth century to Christians and bishops in cities such as Cologne, Mainz, Worms, Speyer, Strasburg and Augst as well as Trier, Metz and Tongeren in the hinterland have long been taken as a proof for an early christianization of the Rhine provinces. An overview of recent excavations, however, casts strong doubts on that view⁴: With the exception of the imperial capital at Trier there seems to have been almost no substantial ecclesiastical building activity in the fourth and fifth centuries. From the perspective of archaeology, the Rhineland was only christianized in the Merovingian period. Unlike in other parts of the empire, the spread of Christianity in the northwestern provinces, Prien concluded, had hardly begun prior to the late third, and was not finished before the earlier eighth, century. The conclusion also invites us to rethink the situation in other regions like Northern Gaul and Britain.

By contrast, in areas where Christianity spread early, particularistic and regional trends were frequent and could affect the church at every level, not just the episcopate. Christine Shepardson (Knoxville), in “Locating Orthodoxy: Syrian Judaizers and Narratives of Imperial Christianity,” looked at the ways in which the willingness of local congregations to move between different religious spaces, including those not authorized by the rival bishops, could create discourses of inclusion and inclusion, within which accusations of Judaizing were a political tool in the rivalry between bishops to control their congregations. A comparative perspective on the relationship between regional Christianities, elites, and the state was presented by Richard Payne (Cambridge, UK) whose paper (“Hagiography and the Christianization of Local Elites in the Provinces of Late Antique Iran“) looked across the Roman border into the Sassanid empire. Seals as well as literary sources of the late sixth and seventh centuries show the emergence of a new Christian elite in Northern Mesopotamia connected to fiscal reforms under Khosro I. This socio-political development coincides with the appearance of a hagiographic literature which placed the saints in a firmly Iranian cultural setting and made them descendants of old Mesopotamian and Iranian noble families⁵. Payne

⁴ See further S. Ristow, *Frühes Christentum im Rheinland. Die Zeugnisse der archäologischen und historischen Quellen an Rhein, Maas und Mosel*, Bonn 2007.

⁵ See, for instance, Gernot Wiessner, “Christlicher Heiligenkult im Umkreis eines sassanidischen Großkönigs,” in Wilhelm Eilers (ed.), *Festgabe deutscher Iranisten zur 2500 Jahrfeier Irans* (Stuttgart: Hochwacht Druck,

argued that both developments belong together: When Khosro's reforms fostered closer interaction of local notables with the Sassanid state and its aristocracy, such fictional lineages of saints associated with the local Christian notables gave them a means to enhance their social standing vis-à-vis the ancient Sassanid elites. Christianity in the late Sassanid empire thus became an important element for the integration of regional and imperial elites.

By contrast, this sort of stabilizing effect of Christianization among elites was checked, in the Roman empire, by the emergence of socially powerful new elites who challenged and often threatened traditional structures of social power. Choosing one of many examples of that tension, Kai Trampedach (Heidelberg) undertook a detailed study of the relation between Constantinopolitan Holy Men and monks on one side and the emperor and the bishop of the capital on the other side ("Competing Authorities: The Interaction of Emperors, Bishops and Monks in Constantinople in the Fifth Century"). The destructive potential of living saints such as Daniel Stylites for the legitimacy and authority of the traditional political elite as well as the church leaders can easily be shown and is also well-known in other contexts. Trampedach, however, took a contradictory position, arguing that the powerful could also benefit from the presence of holy men to strengthen their position. For weak emperors like Leo I (457-474), holy men in the city of Constantinople proved an important resource on which they capitalized in their attempt to build up legitimacy.

One final aspect of the relationship between Christianity and the integration of the late Roman elites that was discussed during the conference is the degree of internal cohesion within the new Christian elites. Taking the example of the bishop in Late and post-Roman Gaul ("Leadership, Charismatic Authority and Public Office: Bishops in Late Antique Gaul"), Steffen Diefenbach (Augsburg) demonstrated the disintegrating effects competing conceptions of the role of a bishop had for the cohesion of the traditional elites in that region. It has been argued, for example, that the conflicts between Martin of Tours and most of the Gallic episcopate had their roots in the competing ideals of ascetic piety on the one hand and traditional aristocratic conceptions of dignity and authority on the other hand which the majority of the notables-bishops deemed necessary for their office. As Diefenbach pointed out, such tension, however, cannot be explained in social terms: It would be misleading to see Martin as an anti-elitist model of the bishop; quite the contrary, his cult was actively promoted by high-born circles at the top of the western aristocracy including Sulpicius Severus, Paulinus of Nola and Melania the Elder. The conflict within the Gallic episcopate was, then, an inner-

1971): 141-155, and, most recently, Joel T. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006

aristocratic one between those who were willing to integrate the office of the bishop into the traditional power structures and a radically ascetic avant-garde that consciously set itself apart from the aristocratic establishment. As the rise of the Bischofsherrschaft shows, the future was not theirs.

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