

REVIEW

‘WHERE IS THE CENTRE LOCATED?’ INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE IN THE LATE ANTIQUE WORLD

Peter van Nuffelen, ed., *Historiography and Space in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. ix + 217. Hardback, £78.99. ISBN 978-1-108-48128-1.

Maria Conterno and Marianna Mazzola, edd., *Intercultural Exchange in Late Antique Historiography*. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 288. Bibliothèque de *Byzantion* 23. Leuven, Paris, and Bristol, Conn.: Peeters, 2020. Pp. xxi + 168. Hardback, €69.00. ISBN 978-90-429-3975-2.

Both volumes under review originate from the context of the ERC project ‘Memory of Empire: The Post-Imperial Historiography of Late Antiquity’ funded by the European Research Council and led by Peter Van Nuffelen at Ghent University from 2012 to 2017. The articles of the first of these volumes, published in 2019, include some papers delivered at a conference called ‘Historiography and Space in Late Antiquity’ held in Ghent in January 2015, plus some additional invited papers. In his introduction (‘From Imperial to Post-Imperial Space in Late Ancient Historiography’), Van Nuffelen sets out the aspects of spatiality in ancient historiography which are the topics of interest in this volume: how do the cultural, social, and political conditions of the time shape the writing of history with reference to the balance between centre and periphery and the relationship between church and imperial space? As he explains, the central question for each chapter is: ‘Where is the centre located?’, an important question when the centre of empire was no longer Rome and the empire could no longer command control of the Mediterranean, and imperial power was challenged by another power, that of the church. In the context of this era of destabilisation, the authors take regions and texts to explore what happens to the centre as a result of all these challenges and changes.

In the first chapter, ‘Constantinople’s Belated Hegemony’, Anthony Kaldellis traces not just the rise of Constantinople as it became central to the governance and identity of the eastern empire but, more importantly, the acknowledgement of its position in the historical tradition. Constantinople’s bumpy emergence as equal or even superior to Rome is reflected in the secular

histories which often ignore it. In the fifth century, he notes the instances where the term Byzantine (*Byzantiaka*) is used to refer to the city itself and the eastern empire as a whole, a 'quasi-autonomous parallel to the western empire' (35). But in the sixth century, authors abandoned this rival nomenclature and instead engaged in a project to Romanise Constantinople, endowing it with the attributes of Old Rome and moving to a Constantinopolitan-centric view, as political power shifted from west to east.

In the second chapter, 'Beside the Rim of the Ocean: The Edges of the World in Fifth- and Sixth-Century Historiography', Peter Van Nuffelen looks at how four authors engage with the periphery of empire. He notes how in his continuation of the chronicle of Jerome, Hydatius, the bishop of Aquae Flaviae (Chaves) in Gallaecia, emphasises the provincial perspective he brings to his writing; and how Jordanes' history of the Goths traces the passage of the Goths from periphery to centre. Van Nuffelen discusses two occasions in Procopius' *Wars* when he focuses on the edges: the Heruls in Book 6, and the war between the Varni and Angli in Book 8. The role of islands in these stories symbolises 'otherness' and highlights the alien nature of the barbarian groups who live there. Lastly, he explores the treatise entitled *A discourse that sets out what there is at the edges in the four quarters of the world, away from the whole world inhabited by men, set out by the philosopher Andronicus* (a sixth-century Syriac or Greek chronicler). Again, this treatise shows that the lands on the periphery of the empire are strange and carry with them negative connotations in terms of civilisation and morality, but that a relationship exists between them and the empire and that their peoples can be brought within the control of the empire.

In Chapter 3, we move with Tim Greenwood to consider 'Armenian Space in Late Antiquity'. He first sets out to define Armenian space (social, political, and ecclesiastical), before acknowledging that after the end of Arsacid Armenia in 428, there was no independent Armenia as all regions were under the power of either Rome or Persia: the first two subsections therefore explore 'Armenia from a Persian Perspective' and the 'Armenian Provinces of the Roman Empire'. However, despite the political realities, Armenian authors still sought to construct a separate Armenian space. One important text is the geographical work *Aṣṣarḥac'oyc'*, a piece for which there are two recensions with a complicated process of transmission, authorship, and dates, but which was ultimately indirectly related to Ptolemy's *Cosmographia*. It sets Armenia in a universal context, and imagines it at its largest extent of fifteen lands, even though that was not its current size.

In Chapter 4, we move to Spain with Mark Humphries' chapter on 'Narrative and Space in Christian Chronography: John of Biclaro on East, West and Orthodoxy'. The aim, as he states, is to explore the connections between narrative and space in John's chronicle which are manipulated to argue that the conversion of the Spanish Visigoths to Nicene Christianity at the Third Council of Toledo in 589 meant that it was they, and not the East

Romans, who ‘became the chief custodians of Christian orthodoxy and, in effect, the people most favoured by God’ (89). Humphries provides us with very detailed background information under the subheadings of ‘John of Biclaro and his Chronicle’, ‘Tradition, Time and Narrative: John’s Chronological Frameworks’, and ‘Narrative and Geographical Space in John’s Chronicle’ (which includes a table of the thematic and geographical distribution of entries); before moving on to his analysis of how John has manipulated his narrative to showcase the strengths of the Visigoths against a background of imperial decline—‘Between Romans and Visigoths: Manipulating Space for Narrative Ends’. Finally, we reach the conclusion where the Visigoths have now taken over from the Romans: ‘From East to West: The Third Council of Toledo and the Climax of History’. This is a dense chapter in which we learn all about John of Biclaro and his chronicle writing, as well as the affairs of the Visigoths in Spain, especially Leovigild and his successor, Reccared. Humphries even argues how John’s inheritance of the Christian chronicles in the Latin West mirrors the Visigoths’ inheritance of God’s will on earth from the Israelites and Romans.

From the West, we move back to the East, to Syriac literature and authors, for the remaining three contributions. In Chapter 5, ‘The Roman Empire in John of Ephesus’ *Church History: Being Roman, Writing Syriac*, Harmut Leppin makes his focus the writings of John of Ephesus. Leppin seeks to bring out the complexities of this Syriac church politician, an author who was persecuted for his miaphysite stance and who wrote in Syriac, not the language of empire, but who in other ways was a Roman imperial church historian, believing in the fabric of Roman power, even if not in individual imperial acts. He starts by setting John in context (‘Construction of Space(s) in Christian Greek Historiography’), before introducing John (‘John’s Life and Work’). The main part of the chapter, which interrogates John’s views as expressed in the *Church History*, is divided into two sections: the first focusing on ‘Political and Ecclesiastical Space inside the Roman Empire’ (especially Constantinople and Rome) and the second on ‘Political and Ecclesiastical Space outside the Roman Empire’: the real interest here lies with Persia and the Arabs, especially the Arab king al-Mundhir (568/9–581/2) who sympathises with the miaphysites and tries to bring the anti-Chalcedonian groups together. He fell into a trap set by the Emperor Tiberius who himself then died after a number of disasters in Constantinople.

In Chapter 6, ‘Changing Geographies: West Syrian Ecclesiastical Historiography, AD 700–850’, Philip Wood explores how ecclesiastical authors frequently focused on specific regions despite writing about a universal church. This is a complex chapter involving a number of writers and points of perspective. The first subsection (‘A History of Bishops and Councils’) introduces the chronicle of Michael the Syrian as a witness for earlier histories, particularly that of Dionysius of Tel-Mahre. ‘The World of the Patriarchs’

allows Wood to contrast the different approaches to patriarchates by historians of the fifth century and the later Jacobites (for example, Jerusalem scarcely features in Dionysius). The third section explores the importance of the sees of Alexandria and Antioch while the fourth part looks at the lack of interest by the Jacobite historians, in contrast to John of Ephesus, towards missionary activity and the reasons behind this. Another set of contrasts is surveyed in the subsection 'The Chalcedonian Imagination of the Patriarchates' where Wood looks at how the Mediterranean world, emperor, and five patriarchates remained important to the Chalcedonians for longer than to the Jacobites and others. Cities such as Antioch are replaced by monasteries which take on a new significance in Jacobite ecclesiastical history ('Monasteries in the Jacobite Histories'), the corollary of which is that certain places and the Christian Arabs seem to disappear from the record ('Places Unmentioned').

In the final contribution of the volume, Chapter 7, Scott Johnson poses the question: 'Where is Syriac Pilgrimage Literature in Late Antiquity? Exploring the Absence of a Genre.' He looks at other examples of pilgrimage writing, considers various reasons, but concludes that it still remains a literary historical problem.

It is obvious that so far this review has been more of a summary of each contribution rather than an analysis of the argument, perhaps for the very reason that each paper makes its own particular contribution to the studies on the particular authors, genres, and locus whether Constantinople, Armenia, Spain, or Syria. Lifting one's head from the detailed argument pursued in each chapter, I am not sure if I have the answer to all the questions raised in the introduction, or whether I emerge with a convincing idea that change in geographical focus is a clear way of chronicling the transformation of historiography in late antiquity (13). But to me, this possible weakness is more than compensated for by the fact that we are provided with a collection of papers which is valuable in other respects: these individual yet (loosely) related studies offer us different approaches and methodologies to explore a rich and diverse number of texts and authors, some familiar and some less well-known, and to raise questions and to illuminate another aspect of the late antique world.

This is also my verdict for the second volume under review, published in 2020. The papers result partly from a workshop on intercultural exchange in late antique historiography in September 2015, with the addition of two invited contributions. In the introduction, Maria Conterno explores the four terms which make up the title of the workshop and volume ('intercultural', 'exchange', 'late antique', and 'historiography') and after summarising each paper, she seeks to highlight the common threads: the significance of the diachronic dimension, especially regarding translations of texts; and the idea of cultures in competition with each other.

In the first chapter, 'Intercultural Exchanges in Greek and Latin Histories and Chronicles', Hervé Inglebert starts by identifying the types of intercultural

exchanges: cultural contact, cultural exchange, and cultural transfer. He reminds us of the hegemonic position of Greek and Latin in the Roman Empire, and the changes brought about by the new late antique context in which Rome's position of superiority was no longer assured by competing military and political powers and the rise of the church. He looks at 'ethnographic otherness' in Rufinus of Aquileia's account of the conversion of the Iberians and Ammianus Marcellinus' description of the Persian kingdom. Finally, Inglebert comes to cultural exchanges in translation which he illustrates with a detailed analysis of the Latin translation by Jerome of Stridon in AD 380–1 of the second part of Eusebius of Caesarea's *Chronicle*, the *Canon* (the synoptic chronological tables). After looking at the political and military additions (A) and cultural additions (B), Inglebert concludes that the additions were used to lend Eusebius' work a particular political orientation which reflected Jerome's own education and aims, making the *Canons* suitable for his audience of Roman social and ecclesiastical elites.

We stay with the work of Eusebius with the second contribution by S. A. Robbe and C. Noce: 'Translating Eusebius' "Church History" in the West and in the East: Rufinus and his Contemporary Syriac Colleague'. Robbe considers 'Rufinus' free rendering of Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*' made at Aquileia in AD 401–2 at the request of bishop Chromatius to encourage the Christians during the Gothic invasion of Italy. As well as his translation, Rufinus added two new books continuing the narrative to Theodosius' death in AD 395. The transmission of the Syriac translation, as considered by Noce, is far more complicated, surviving principally in two manuscripts, but has been described as being among 'reader-oriented free translations' (46). Although there are differences in the styles and goals of the authors, the two contributors conclude that both authors were very careful to avoid any heretical expressions; that they both replaced Greek terminology with terms which would be more familiar to their readers; and that although there were differences in how they dealt with the translation of Eusebius' sources (Rufinus generally being the more creative interpreter), both tried to make the text more accessible to their Latin or Syriac readers.

The third contribution, 'Transmitting and Being Transmitted: The Spread and Reception of the *History of the Episcopate of Alexandria* in Carthage and Aksum' is by Alberto Camplani. The *Historia episcopatus Alexandriae* was originally written in Greek but is preserved in mainly Latin and ancient Ethiopic, with fragments in Greek and Syriac. It includes short histories and descriptions of church leaders (similar to the *Liber Pontificalis*) and documents which promote the ecclesiastical primacy of Alexandria in the East. As well as transmitting texts, it is transmitted itself, being preserved in two canonical/synodical collections. The very detailed discussion which follows aims to explore the connections between this work and others and to tie into the notion of geo-ecclesiology which promoted Alexandria.

From an Alexandrian text, we move to a chapter on ‘Caucasian Historical Literature, the Iranian Epic, and the Diversity of Late Antiquity’, by Stephen H. Rapp, Jr, offering a yet more exotic dimension to the interconnections of the late antique world this time in the region situated between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. The peoples of this region, Armenians, eastern Georgians and Albanians, all borrowed, adapted and contributed to Iranian epic. The major part of the chapter explores these different interactions, and in his conclusion Rapp advocates for a more positive view of the Roman–Persian/Christian–Zoroastrian exchanges in areas such as the Caucasus.

In the next chapter, ‘‘A Wise Indian Astronomer Called Gandoubarios’’: Malalas and the Legend of Yoniṭon’, Andy Hilkens explores Malalas’ handling of the legend. He uses it to elucidate the chronicler’s presentation of world history, which involved the reconstruction of the history of astronomy, and which located the origins of science, kingship, and writing in Syria, his own birthplace.

Finally, in the last contribution, ‘Found in Translation: Agapius, the Septuagint, and the “falsified” Torah of the Jews’, Maria Conterno looks at the particular problem of translating the Bible, as raised by Agapius of Manbij, the Melkite Bishop of Mabbug in northern Syria. In the 940s, he wrote a universal chronicle in Arabic, and is very concerned by the alleged manipulation of biblical chronology by the Jews which explains the discrepancy between the biblical chronology in the Septuagint and that in the Masoretic text of the Torah. The original problem concerned the tampering with biblical chronology by the Jewish High Priests, Annas and Caiaphas, to prove that Jesus could not have been the Messiah. A later complication came when during a visit to Jerusalem, Constantine was able to discover the truth: he found that the Hebrew text had been tampered with and that only the Greek Septuagint held the truth. Conterno interrogates these stories to explore the intercultural composition of the narrative and to show how the Greek translation was able to preserve the truth. She concludes that Christianity needed to both distance itself from the pagan and Jewish past while claiming to be its legitimate heir, just as in Agapius’ world, Muslims felt the same complicated relationship towards Greek wisdom and science.

Again, all six contributions are incredibly detailed and tackle very different authors, texts, and regions of the late antique world, including those well outside the usual boundaries of the Greco-Roman world. In their own way, however, they all contribute to the overall topic, and our picture of intercultural exchange in late antique historiography is certainly enriched.