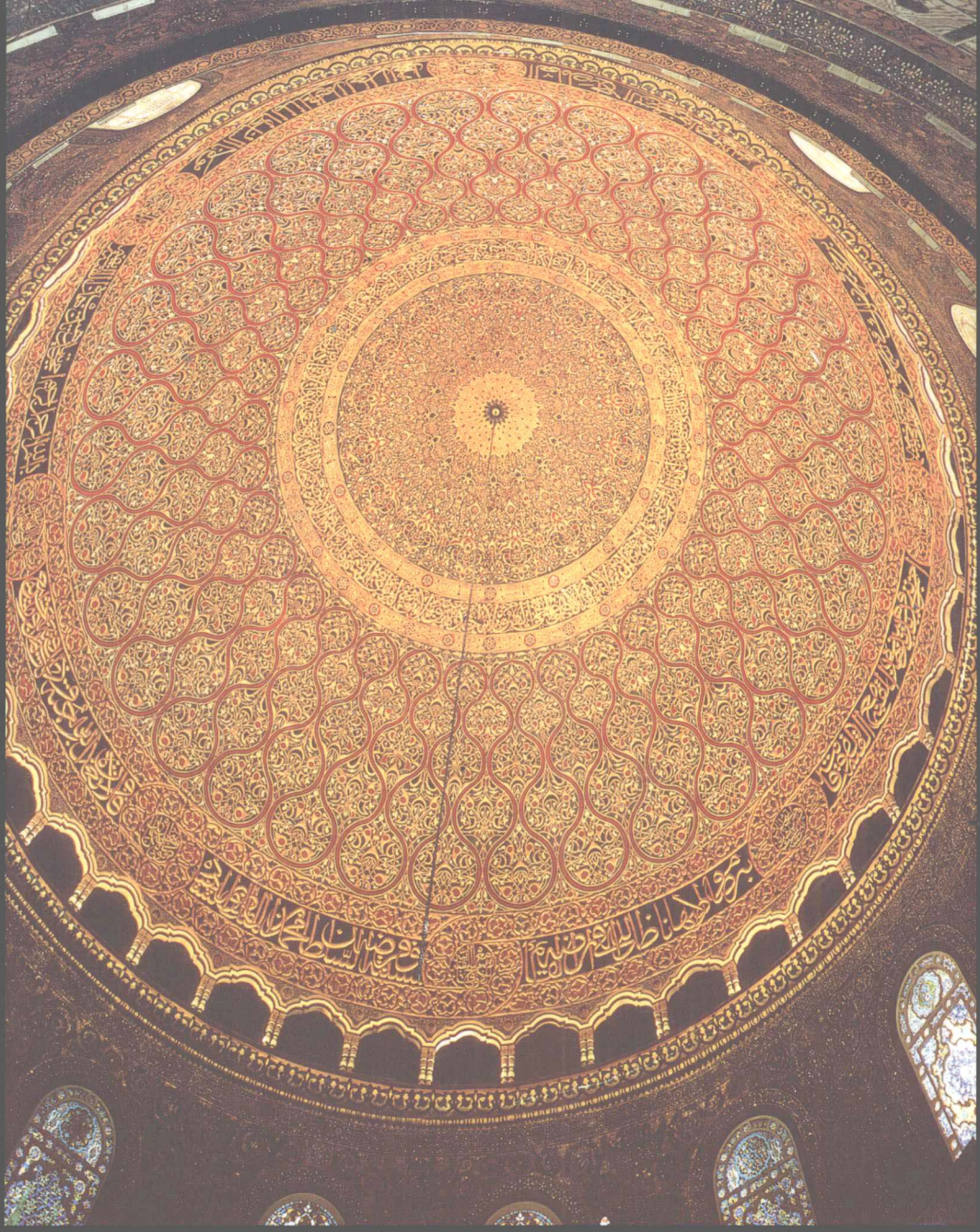

INTERPRETING LATE ANTIQUITY

Essays on the Postclassical World

Edited by G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown & Oleg Grabar

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INTRODUCTION

In the year 250 C.E., the most populous and long-settled regions of western Eurasia, which stretched in a great arc from the Atlantic coasts of France, Portugal, and Morocco across the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Middle East as far as Afghanistan, were subject to the control of two—and only two—immense imperial systems: the Roman empire and the Sassanian empire of Persia. Over five hundred years later, around 800 C.E., the populations of the same area still lived largely in the shadow of empire. The Roman empire was still there. From Calabria, across the southern Balkans, and deep into Anatolia, the territories of what we call, by a modern misnomer redolent of ill-informed contempt, the "Byzantine" empire, had been ruled continuously for over eight hundred years by the direct successors of Emperor Augustus. In Rome itself, the pope was still a "Roman." Every document emanating from the papal chancery was dated by the regnal date of the Roman emperor who reigned at Constantinople and by the *Indictio,* a fifteen-year tax cycle that had started in 312.

In 800, also, from Central Asia to the plateau of Castile, an Islamic caliphate, created at headlong speed by the Arab conquests of the 7th century, had gained stability by settling back into the habits of the ancient empires it had replaced. The tax system of the Islamic empire continued with little break the practices of the Roman and Sassanian states. Its coins were *denarii, dinar*s. The system of post-horses and of governmental information on which its extended rule depended was called after its Roman predecessor *veredus, al-barīd.* Its most significant enemy was still known, in Arabic, as the empire of *Rum*—the empire of Rome in the east, centered on Constantinople.

For all the startling and self-conscious novelty of their religion, the early Muslim conquerors of the Middle East found themselves heirs to a past of extraordinary density. This past piled up around them in every city they had occupied. The first great public mosque was created, at the Umayyad capital at Damascus, by the simple and dramatic expedient of embracing, in a single

enclosure made of porticoes sheathed in shimmering east Roman mosaics, the former temple precinct of Jupiter/Haddad and its recent Christian rival, the shrine of St. John the Baptist. A thousand years of unbroken urban history, and the history of two religions, were thus encased in a new, Muslim place of worship. In 762, the center of what would become the medieval Islamic caliphate was created by the founding of Baghdad. Baghdad stood on ground heavy with the past. It lay upriver from the ruins of the former Sassanian capital of Ctesiphon. These ruins were dominated by the Taq-i Kesra, the immense shell of the Sassanian Palace Arch ascribed to Khosro I Anushirvan (530–579). The awesome height and apparent indestructibility of that great arch of brick was a permanent reminder of an ancient, pre-Islamic style of rule, indelibly associated with the memory of Khosro, the contemporary and rival of the east Roman emperor Justinian (527–565)—himself no mean creator of enduring legacies, the builder of the Hagia Sophia and the definitive codifier of the laws of Rome.

Only at the western tip of Eurasia, in what we call western Europe, did it seem as if the long summer's afternoon of empire had begun to fade. Yet from Ireland to the upper Danube, the clergy shared a common Catholicism, first formed in the Christian Roman empire of Constantine and Theodosius I. Even on the outer periphery of Europe, the clergy still thought of themselves as part of a wider world embraced by great empires. To enter the library of Iona, on the southwest coast of Scotland, and to consult its books was to share in a sacred geography of Christendom that still stretched along the entire length of the old Roman empire and beyond: it included not only Jerusalem and the Holy Places, but also Alexandria, Damascus, Edessa, and memories of Christian martyrs yet farther to the east, in Mesopotamia and northern Iraq.

Although alternately decried and romanticized by scholars of the 18th and 19th centuries as pure "barbarians," the ruling classes of the postimperial kingdoms of the west had, in fact, inherited a basically Roman sense of social order and a Roman penchant for extended empire. Power still wore a Roman face. The acclamation of the Frankish king, Charlemagne, by the Roman people and by the pope as "their" emperor, in 800 (and the deadly seriousness with which Charlemagne accepted the compliment) was yet another case of a successful state-builder from a once peripheral region easing himself into the comfortable seat provided by half a millennium of empire. Charlemagne's contemporary, Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, viewed the indestructible arch of Khosro with much the same mixture of awe and proud entitlement as did Charlemagne when faced with a Rome heavy with pagan and Christian memories. They were both, each in his own distinctive way, inheritors of a remarkable Age of Empires.

We should not take this for granted. Back in 250 it was far from certain that an Age of Empires lay in the immediate future. Torn by civil war and largely unprepared for large-scale mobilization, the Roman empire seemed doomed to disintegrate. Nor could anyone have foretold that the Sassanian dynasty, which emerged so rapidly from Fars in the 220s, would eventually mold the sub-kingdoms of the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia into the formidable world power of the age of Khosro Anushirvan, and in so doing would provide

a model of empire as enduring, for the populations of Islamic Asia, as was the myth of Rome for the Christians of western Europe. By the end of the 7th century, it seemed as if the Arab conquerors would destroy themselves through reckless civil wars within fifty years of their conquests. Yet none of these possible events happened. In each case, the immediate future lay not with chaos but with the reassertion of strong, extended empires. The reformed Roman empire of Diocletian and Constantine was the most formidably governed state ever created in the ancient world. It survived largely intact in its eastern regions until 640. The consolidation of the Iranian territories under the Sassanian King of Kings involved a similar, if less clearly documented achievement. After a period of civil wars, the Islamic caliphate emerged, under the Abbasid dynasty at Baghdad, to form what has rightly been called the last great empire of antiquity. As a result, the populations of western Eurasia (even those of western Europe) could look back, in the year 800, to find their horizon blocked by the massive outlines of great empires, frequently overhauled since 250 yet still irreplaceable.

But there was more to it than that. Today, as Jews, Zoroastrians, Christians, and Muslims, millions of persons are the direct heirs of religions either born or refashioned in late antiquity. Some religions took the form in which they are still recognizable—as was the case with the Jews—within communities bounded by the Roman and the Sassanian empires. Others grasped the fact of empire with spectacular results. Zoroastrians look back to the age of the Sassanians as the time of the restoration of their orthodoxy and of the formation of their religious literature. The Christians embraced with zeal the Christian Roman empire of Constantine and his successors. The Muslims created rapidly, from the remnants of the Roman and the Sassanian states, an empire of their own.

This, very briefly, is what we mean when we talk of "late antiquity." The essays in this volume, commissioned for the reference work *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World,* share the frank assumption that the time has come for scholars, students, and the educated public in general to treat the period between around 250 and 800 as a distinctive and quite decisive period of history that stands on its own. It is not, as it once was for Edward Gibbon, a subject of obsessive fascination only as the story of the unraveling of a once glorious and "higher" state of civilization. It was not a period of irrevocable Decline and Fall; nor was it merely a violent and hurried prelude to better things. It cannot be treated as a corpse to be dragged quickly offstage so that the next great act of the drama of the Middle Ages should begin—with the emergence of Catholic Europe and the creation of the Arabic civilization associated with the golden age of medieval Islam.

Not only did late antiquity last for over half a millennium; much of what was created in that period still runs in our veins. It is, for instance, from late antiquity, and not from any earlier period of Roman history, that we have inherited the codifications of Roman law that are the root of the judicial systems of so many states in Europe and the Americas. The forms of Judaism associated with the emergence of the rabbinate and the codification of the Talmud emerged from late antique Roman Palestine and from the distinctive

society of Sassanian Mesopotamia. The basic structures and dogmatic formulations of the Christian church, both in Latin Catholicism and in the many forms of eastern Christianity, came from this time, as did the first, triumphant expression of the Muslim faith. Even our access to the earlier classics of the ancient world, in Latin and Greek, was made possible only through the copying activities of late antique Christians and their early medieval successors, locked in an endless, unresolved dialogue with their own pagan past.

Compared with the solid, almost unseen ground-course of institutions and ideas created in late antiquity that still lie at the foundations of our own world, the earlier classical period of the ancient world has a surreal, almost weightless quality about it. It is the Dream Time of western civilization. It can act as a never failing source of inspiration. But we cannot claim to come from that classical world alone, for whole segments of the modern world had no place in it. These emerged, rather, in the period between 250 and 800: a Europe in which the non-Roman north and the Roman south came to be joined in a common Catholic Christianity; a Greek-speaking world that stood at the western pole of a widely extended federation of Christian communities which ranged from Georgia to Ethiopia, and from Mesopotamia to Kerala and western China; a Middle East in which Constantinople/Istanbul and Baghdad were founded (in 324 and in 762) and have remained among the most emotionally charged cities of Asia; a paganism that lived on, no longer in temples, but in austere philosophical systems that summed up an ancient wisdom which continued to fascinate and to repel Christians, Jews, and Muslims for centuries to come; a Middle East in which Islam had, by 800, become an overwhelming presence. Nothing like this was to be seen before 250. These developments belong to late antiquity. If we do not like what we see in late antiquity, it is often because the ideas and the structures that first emerged at that time are still with us. They have the power to move or to repel us even today. The period which has bequeathed to us such living legacies deserves attention in its own right.

This volume also attempts to treat as a single whole the vast geographic space covered by the Roman and the Sassanian empires. And even this extensive space must be seen as no more than a vivid cluster of settlements set in a yet wider world. For, in this period, societies as far apart as Scandinavia and the Hadramawt, Saharan Africa and western China were touched by events along that great arc of imperially governed societies and interacted decisively, at crucial moments, with those societies.

Above all, these essays draw on the advances in scholarship that have enabled scholars for the first time to treat, with even-handed erudition, the very different regions of western Europe, the eastern empire, the Sassanian empire, and the early caliphate, as well as the many more distant societies that were implicated in the overall development of the late antique period.

For if there is one thing which we as the editors of *Late Antiquity* and this volume would wish to bring about, it is that its readers should begin the 21st century with fewer artificial barriers in their minds, erected between periods and regions which have proved, in the light of modern research, to be more continuous with each other than we had once thought. For instance, we go out

of our way to encourage readers to join the history of the later Roman empire in the east with the subsequent evolution of the first centuries of Islam. We also encourage the reader to stand on both sides of the political frontiers of the empires of that time. For if they do this, they will be able better to appreciate the all-important process of symbiosis that led to the creation, and to the eventual triumph over the traditional empires, of new societies, created in the "war zones" of the Rhine and the Danube, of Sassanian Central Asia and of the steppelands of Syria and Iraq.

We hope that the interested reader will travel from the world of Constantine to the seemingly very different world of the Damascus of ʿAbd al-Malik—and may be surprised to see that not everything had changed. We wish our readers to make a habit of crossing the political frontier that separated late Roman Syria from the busy world of Sassanian Iraq, and of traveling to the steppes of Central Asia and eastern Europe to take up an unexpected viewpoint upon the Roman empire. We also hope to remind students of religion and of the history of ideas of the unexpected, long-term consequences of many of the better-known achievements of the period. They will find, for instance, that texts of Greek philosophy, science, and medicine written at the beginning of our period will, by the end of it, be circulating in more copies in Syriac and Arabic than in their Greek original. They will be struck by the tenacity and by the long-term implications of the philosophical and theological issues debated in the period. Such themes can be appreciated only when seen in the long term, as they endure and change over many centuries and in very different environments. Not least of the surprises in store for the reader will be the extent to which religious groups, who throughout this period made a point of distinguishing themselves from each other with singular ferocity, continued, in fact, to be drawn together by the mute force of common intellectual preoccupations and, even when they fought most fiercely (by attacking the cult sites of their rivals), by the oceanic weight of shared notions of the sacred. Whether they liked each other or not, they remained not only "Christians," "Jews," and "pagans," "orthodox" and "heretics," "clergy" and "laity": they breathed the same heavy air of a common civilization—that of late antiquity.

Travel of this kind is calculated to broaden the mind. Students of well-known topics in much-studied regions—for instance, those interested in the Christianization of western Europe—will here be reminded of the working out of analogous processes in other parts of the Christian world. To take one example, the recent remarkable increase of archaeological discoveries in the countries of the Middle East adds a new dimension to such study. It is now possible to compare phenomena well known to the student of the postimperial west, such as the explosion of church building in the cities of Merovingian Gaul, with evidence for a similar explosion among the Christian communities of the Middle East. Fifteen late antique churches, mainly from the 6th century, have been discovered in Jerash (Jordan) alone. The splendid mosaics recently uncovered at Mefaa, modern Umm ar-Rasas (also in Jordan) have made us all sit up and take notice. These are recognizably late antique productions. They contain scenes that lovingly depict the classical facades of neighboring cities. Yet they were laid

down in 718 C.E., that is, by exact contemporaries of the Venerable Bede. They were the work of Christians who had already lived for almost eighty years as subjects of the Islamic empire. It is in such small details, unavailable to us until only a few decades ago, that we can gain, through comparison across widely separated regions, a sense of scale and of the pace of a worldwide phenomenon, such as the establishment and survival of the Christian church in its many regions.

Through recent archaeological discoveries, it is now possible to grasp an entire world no longer in its broad outlines, through the magisterial sweep of narratives such as Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* or, as in a magnificent bird's eye view, through A. H. M. Jones's *The Later Roman Empire,* but rather in the accumulation of vivid details on the ground. An entire landscape has filled up with the traces of villages and unpretentious bathhouses, with the jolly mosaics of the petty gentry and with hundreds of little churches and synagogues dedicated by pious notables. Scattered across the entire sweep of the late antique Mediterranean and the Middle East, these recently discovered remains remind us that late antiquity did, indeed, happen. We are dealing with a distinctive civilization, whose density and sheer tenacity, on a humble level that we had hitherto barely suspected, demands some form of overall treatment.

In these essays, we have not wished to sacrifice the vividness of a personal introduction to selected themes to the harmless drudgery of a comprehensive survey. The essays are meant to provoke thought. They are not there to repeat, under the guise of providing comprehensive information, the narrative stereotypes that have weighed particularly heavily on our interpretation of the period. It is the frank intention of the authors of these essays to encourage readers to travel further in new directions. For it is their opinion that new directions have, indeed, been opened up for the period of late antiquity in a manner which would barely have been thinkable only a century ago; and that these directions point firmly away from many commonly accepted stereotypes of the period.

It has long been recognized that the late antique period stands at the crossroads of many histories. The great highroads of many well-established disciplines traverse our period: dictionaries of the classical world end in late antiquity, dictionaries of Judaism and Christianity inevitably pass through it, dictionaries of Islam, Byzantium, and the Middle Ages make it their starting point. Besides our own *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World,* we can refer the reader to many exhaustive dictionaries, encyclopedias, and lexicons that deal competently with themes that are central to late antiquity. To take an obvious example: those interested in the history of the Christian church are urged to turn to works such as *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church,* the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité,* the *Prosopographie chrétienne* (which has already produced one precious volume for Africa), the *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* and, now, to *The Coptic Encyclopedia*—to mention only a few. And for those in whom these essays have instilled a salutary zest for further information, we need only point out *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium,* the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire,* and the new edition of

The Oxford Classical Dictionary, not to mention *The Encyclopedia Judaica,* the *Encyclopedia of Islam,* and the *Reallexikon für germanische Altertumskunde,* among many other reliable and largely up-to-date works of reference. If this volume inspires in its readers a wish to continue to study the distinctive period of late antiquity in its many aspects and to follow the directions into new territory to which it points, then the editors will consider that this volume will have served its purpose.

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Remaking the Past

Averil Cameron

In his poem on the war against Count Gildo in North Africa, the late 4th century Latin poet Claudian depicts Roma, the personification of the city, as aged and unkempt, "feeble her voice, slow her step, her eyes deep buried. Her cheeks were sunken and hunger had wasted her limbs. Scarce can her weak shoulders support her unpolished shield. Her ill-fitting helmet shows her grey hairs and the spear she carries is a mass of rust."[1] His contemporary Quintus Aurelius Symmachus depicted Rome in similar guise, pleading with the emperor for toleration for pagans, while the Christian poet Prudentius reversed the trope and portrayed Roma rejuvenated by Christianity.

There was no nostalgia for the past here. Romantic ruins and decayed grandeur held no magic for this generation; indeed, Emperor Constantius II, who visited Rome in 357, and the historian Ammianus Marcellinus, who was at work on his Latin history there in the 380s, were as overcome by Rome's present majesty as by her great past.[2] Not for men such as these the self-conscious lament for past greatness or the fascination with antique decline familiar to us from Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, or from 18th century pictures such as Fuseli's *The Artist Moved by the Grandeur of Ancient Ruins* (1778–1779), which shows a seated figure mourning beside the colossal hand and foot that remain from the monumental statue of Constantine the Great set up after his victory over Maxentius and his entry into Rome.[3] By the 7th and 8th centuries, Constantine the Great had passed from history into orthodox sainthood, his chief function in Byzantine legend being his commemoration with his mother Helena as the founder of Constantinople and finder of the True Cross; in the west, Rome laid claim to his Christian identity by means of the legend of his baptism by Pope Sylvester.[4] This is no romanticizing of the past, but rather its practical adaptation to the needs of the present. If the men and women of late antiquity did not romanticize the past, nor were they conscious of a sense of modernity. Rather, they wished devoutly

to connect with a past which they still saw as part of their own experience and their own world. This could easily lead to incongruity in modern eyes; but it puzzles us far more than it did contemporaries to find, for example, fragments of classical masonry or sculpture built in to new constructions which we tend to find inferior.[5] The past was very real to the men and women of late antiquity: as they saw it, it had not so much to be remade as to be reasserted.

The past was so real that it was the subject of intense competition. For Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339), the apologist of Constantine the Great, and for other Christian writers, it had above all to be wrested from the grip of pagans. According to Eusebius, the great oracles, the sources of ancient knowledge, were silent and the pagan shrines the home only of "dead idols." So much for centuries of tradition. But in fact the most prestigious oracular shrines were far from dead, and Eusebius's views were set out in direct challenge to the recent arguments of the great Neoplatonic philosopher and scholar Porphyry, expressed in his work *On Philosophy from Oracles,* which demonstrated through a collection of oracles that oriental, Jewish, and indeed Christian divine revelation had all been encompassed in the sayings of the gods.[6] Just as crucial for Eusebius, the greatest biblical scholar of his generation, was the question of the date of Moses; his Christian conception of history required a progression from the Mosaic law, through the development of Greek philosophy, represented above all by Plato, toward the attainment of the *pax Augusta* which alone provided the necessary setting for the coming of Christ and the spread of Christianity. Eusebius had set out these ideas most fully in his *Preparation for the Gospel,* an apologetic positioning of Christian revelation in the context of world history. Here too Porphyry, also the author of *Against the Christians,* a dangerously influential attack on Christianity (Emperor Constantine later ordered copies to be burnt), was Eusebius's chief target.

The *Preparation* asserted the primacy of Moses over Plato, the Jewish law over Greek philosophy, more particularly in its contemporary Neoplatonic manifestation in the teachings of Porphyry. In the *Life of Constantine,* a panegyrical defense of the emperor, Eusebius went much further than he had done in book nine of the *Ecclesiastical History* in presenting Constantine himself as the new Moses, bringing his people from the slavery of persecution and paganism to the new dispensation of Christianity, and—as Eusebius also claimed in the *Oration* he wrote for Constantine's thirtieth anniversary in 335–36—establishing a Christian kingdom on earth that was a true likeness of God's kingdom in heaven. In the heat of victory the emperor had made Porphyry the subject of public condemnation, but even so Eusebius's optimistic assertions were far from convincing pagan intellectuals. As so often, the optimism publicly expressed by both sides betrays the intense anxiety which was privately felt. Just one among many revealing indications of that is the scornful portrayal of Constantine by Julian, the son of his half-brother and a convert from Christianity to paganism, in Julian's *Caesares;* far from being the triumphant new Moses of Eusebius, Julian's Constantine is a pitiful suppliant in heaven unable to find a god willing to befriend him.

The need to claim the past for one's own in no way diminished. A curious

work by Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis (Constantia) in Cyprus, known as the *Panarion* or "Medicine Chest" (376 C.E.), presents a catalogue of heresies starting with a chronological survey of religious belief in world history, from the Bible to Christian heresy. There are two schemes: in one, heresy was preceded by the sins of adultery, rebellion, and idolatry, which originated from the Fall, while in the other, four great periods of heresy succeeded each other from Adam onward: barbarism, Scythian superstition, Hellenism, and Judaism. Epiphanius's catalogue is not of course a history, but rather a formalist treatise, in which, indeed, the number of heresies is explicitly made to fit the eighty concubines in the Song of Songs (6:8). It is an odd work to modern eyes. Yet Epiphanius was a leading controversialist of his generation, and the work answered to burning contemporary concerns.[7]

The *Panarion* also displays the difficulty which Christian scholars experienced in their attempts to deal with biblical texts. The later 4th century saw a series of such efforts, focusing on the accounts of creation in the Book of Genesis. Basil of Caesarea composed a *Hexaemeron,* a series of sermons on the six days of creation. Their purpose was, in the words of a recent writer, to present a "complete cosmology," which would give "an account of humanity's place in that world, and of humanity's destiny."[8] For Christians, the two aims were inseparable, for Christianity saw itself as a religion grounded in history; consequently, not just the Scriptures but the whole of history had to be expounded in Christian terms. This rereading of history also implied human psychology; it called forth from Basil a "translucent overlay of different planes of perception: the self, the world and the drama of God's action."[9] But a detailed exegesis of Genesis was also required. Augustine attempted to expound its meaning in several of his major works, including the *Confessions* and the *City of God.*[10] He also composed twelve books of commentary on its literal meaning, the *De Genesi ad litteram* (from 401 C.E.). Then as now, others gave the text a fundamentalist interpretation, and Augustine too wrote with an eye to the Neoplatonist view that the world was uncreated. The debate on creation between Christians and Neoplatonists was still continuing in the 6th century, when the Alexandrian John Philoponus wrote a work in which he argued against the views of Proclus on the subject, and a mysterious Cosmas Indicopleustes, "the sailor to India," composed a prose *Christian Topography* arguing against Aristotle for a flat earth with the damned below and heaven above; illustrations from the 9th century and later indicate that Cosmas's work included pictures of this hierarchical arrangement, which took the Ark of the Covenant as their model.[11] Augustine's approach to creation and to time was of course more sophisticated: Plato's *Timaeus,* with its account of creation, was a work read by both Christians and Neoplatonists and offered Augustine some possibility of a middle ground. Yet God must be seen to have created the world.

The Scriptures, above all Genesis, provided more than a guide to the history of the world and a template for anthropological understanding. The advent of sin and its effects in history pervade Augustine's *City of God,* and this consideration of sin led him and others to ask a whole variety of further questions about the past, for instance whether angels existed before the creation of the

world.[12] Especially in the late 4th century, Genesis also became the fundamental text for expounding male and female relations, the "tunics of skins" of Gen. 3:21 a token for some interpreters of the fact that human sexuality followed only after and as a consequence of the Fall.[13] But as human history, and human anthropology, were thus mapped onto the biblical story of Paradise lost, so the present was offered as a series of reenactments of Scriptural history, Constantine as Moses, holy men and women as Job. Scripture provided both a past and a living present. Even the conservative genre of imperial panegyric eventually wove images from the Hebrew Bible into its texture, and the victories of Heraclius over the Persians in the early 7th century led to his being hailed in poetry and depicted in visual art as the new David.[14] Heraclius is likened also to Elijah and Moses, and his court poet, George of Pisidia, also returned to the theme of the creation as an image of imperial renewal in a long poem also known as the *Hexaemeron,* written soon after Heraclius's victory over the Persians in 628 and his restoration of the True Cross to Jerusalem in 630.[15]

The Scriptures, then, presented both an opportunity and a challenge in late antiquity. They provided vocabulary, imagery, and subject matter for poets; models for holy men and women; and ways of understanding humanity and the world. But they required exegesis, and this could be difficult and risky. Sometimes "saving the text" resulted in interpretations which now seem fanciful and undisciplined in the extreme. But no one in late antiquity would have understood the post 19th century view of the story of the creation and Fall as "profound religious myths, illuminating our human situation."[16]

It was not only Christians in late antiquity who were remaking their past or using mythology in order to do so. The same inventive Epiphanius, author of the *Panarion,* gives us some information about a cult of Kore's giving birth to Aion ("time") in late 4th century Alexandria.[17] Aion is known at an earlier date from an inscription at Eleusis, a relief at Aphrodisias and a cosmological mosaic at Mérida in Spain, and from the 4th century from mosaics at New Paphos in Cyprus. But by the 4th century, in Egypt at least, Aion had taken on the new role of god of the mysteries, sprung from a virgin birth. In the Cyprus mosaic he is associated with the myth of Cassiopeia, in a composition including the infancy of Dionysus, themes also found at Apamea.[18] Domestic textiles surviving from Egypt show the popularity of mythological and especially Dionysiac themes as decoration even into the Islamic period. Paganism in late antiquity, especially of the more intellectual kind, was vigorous and productive, and knew how to take its cue from Christianity. It was not only Christians, for instance, who made pilgrimages: Neoplatonists, too, sought for origins, and went looking for sacred springs and streams in remote places.[19]

One way of shaping and making sense of the past in accordance with contemporary ideas was, paradoxically, via the routes of prophecy, eschatology, and millennialism. Again, one is confronted by a powerful sense of rivalry and competition. An industry grew up in oracles: in the 3rd century, the thirteenth Sibylline Oracle (the very name lent an aura of antiquity and mystery) interpreted the wars and invasions in the east in that period in oracular terms,[20]

while the so-called Chaldaean Oracles popularized by Iamblichus claimed to convey messages from the soul of Plato himself. The net was cast wide: a late 5th century collection of oracular utterances known today as the Tübingen Theosophy survives as part of a Christian polemical work, and corresponds in some part with a famous inscription from the city of Oenoanda in Lycia.[21] Though oracles by their essence were anonymous, no less a person than the Emperor Constantine cited the Sibylline Oracles and Virgil's Fourth Eclogue to Christian purpose in his *Oration to the Saints*.[22] Even as late as the 7th century a collection of pagan oracles was circulating in Syria.

The appeal to tradition was another way of staking a claim in the past. Church fathers like Basil of Caesarea sought authority in the notion of an unbroken tradition handed down since the early days of the church. More recent tradition could be held to lie in councils, above all those recognized as ecumenical. By the 6th and 7th century, lists of councils, with their canons, had become a standard way of claiming authority in doctrinal matters. John Scholasticus and Eutychius, rival patriarchs of Constantinople in the late 6th century, drew up competing lists of conciliar decisions to support their opposing positions. During the period of the iconoclast controversy in Byzantium, from 726 to 843, the nature and meaning of "tradition" were vigorously debated; icons were held by their defenders to represent "unwritten tradition," which, it was claimed, had equal authority with the written tradition of Scriptures, the Fathers, and the councils. Like the drafting of their acts, the identification of authoritative councils was also a matter of contest; the iconoclasts held their own Council at Hieria in 754, the proceedings of which have survived only in the long quotations contained for the purpose of refutation in the Acts of the (iconophile) Second Council of Nicaea of 787.[23] After the ending of iconoclasm, the visual depiction of the ecumenical councils in Byzantine churches was one of the ways of asserting the triumph of tradition and authority which was how the iconophiles saw their victory.[24]

But citation of councils was only one of the means by which competing groups within the church had sought to claim the authority of the past. Handbooks, lists of approved citations from Scripture or from the Fathers, commentaries on the Scriptures are only a few of the methods they used.[25] Once the church had gone down the route of trying to define the nature of God in formulas that must be generally agreed, the inevitable result was intense competition and rivalry, in which every participant and every group resorted separately to the authority of tradition. The ultimate futility of the search can be seen in the progressive appeal to God as mystery, beyond human knowing;[26] nevertheless, neither the attempt nor the appeal to authority was abandoned. Not only Christians appealed to tradition. Proclus and other Neoplatonists saw Plato as offering a kind of sacred text.[27] Reading Plato constituted true spiritual life; the dialogues contained the truth about the gods, and this knowledge was handed down by the succession of heads of the Academy, the Platonic school *par excellence*. A program of Neoplatonic studies presented the dialogues in progression of difficulty. And the succession of heads of the Academy was

accompanied by appeals to divine inspiration, as with Proclus, whom Marinus depicts as the recipient of signs that he should take on the mantle and preserve the heritage of Athena in her own city of Athens.[28]

Athens shared with all other cities in late antiquity a changing urban environment. It had suffered from Herul attack in the 3rd century, was probably sacked by Alaric in 395–96, and was to undergo invasion again by the Slavs and Avars who raided Greece at the end of the 6th century.[29] But church building came late to Athens, and even in the early 5th century a substantial amount of secular building and restoration took place, which according to a recent excavator "respected the traditional character of the city."[30] It included restoration of the Library of Hadrian and the so-called Palace of the Giants, probably in fact a large villa; additions to the Theater of Dionysus; and restorations of a sundial, the so-called House of Proclus, and several other villas and private and public baths. A late Roman villa at Cenchreae, the port of Corinth, was adorned in the 4th century with representations of antique philosophers, like the seven Sages at Apamea in Syria in the same period. The Empress Eudocia, whose husband was Theodosius II, was an Athenian, said to be the daughter of a sophist and a Christian convert; she had pretensions to classical learning (she wrote rather bad poetry), presented herself as a patron of building in the Holy Land, and may have provided the incentive for some of this 5th century building in Athens.[31]

No doubt Athens was a special case; nevertheless, the majority of city-dwellers in late antiquity still lived among manifestations of the past in the built and visual environment. The porticoed houses of the rich in late antiquity continued in use into the 6th century, even though the stones of the forum might be used without embarrassment for church-building. In Carthage, the Vandal aristocracy on the eve of the Byzantine reconquest by Belisarius in the 530s prided itself on the culture it had taken over from its Roman subjects; passable Latin epigrams celebrated the houses and lifestyle of the Vandal nobles, and the circus remained in use into the Byzantine period. In what is now Jordan, the 6th century was a period of economic vitality, and some Christian communities were still commissioning fine Hellenizing mosaics late into the 8th. But in Constantinople the fire which accompanied the so-called Nika revolt in 532 destroyed not only the original Great Church but also the classical statuary which had adorned the Baths of Zeuxippus and the Senate House. An Egyptian poet, Christodorus of Coptus, had written a long (416 lines) Greek hexameter poem in praise of the Zeuxippus statues.[32] The *spina* around which the chariots raced in the Hippodrome continued to display some of the most famous statues of antiquity, including the reclining Herakles of Lysippus, until they were looted in the Fourth Crusade. But already by the 8th century the city had shrunk to a shadow of its former self, and the remaining classical statuary was only half-understood, or indeed the object of superstitious fear by reason of its pagan associations.[33] By now there was little sound secular education to be had, even in the capital; fascination with the past had replaced actual knowledge, just as the historical Constantine had given way to the Constantine of legend, the saintly founder of Christian Constantinople.

This legendary past was embellished in the imagination in a variety of ways.