

Late antiquity and Byzantium: an identity problem

Averil Cameron

Keble College Oxford

averil.cameron@keble.ox.ac.uk

1975 seems light years away. In parts of the field of Byzantine studies, at any rate, the world has shifted, and perhaps most of all in that contested territory of early Byzantium, otherwise known as late antiquity. The first issue of *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* was published only four years after Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity*,¹ and before the 'explosion' of late antiquity.² This was also the start of another explosion: the emergence of late antique archaeology as a discipline, leading to its vast expansion and the enormous and ever-growing amount of material available today. For the first time, John Hayes's *Late Roman Pottery* (1972) enabled reliable dating criteria for the ceramic evidence that became the foundation of a new understanding of trade and economic life.³ The UNESCO Save Carthage campaign, a landmark in the reliable recording of excavations of the late antique period, began in the following year, and since then the growth in data has been exponential. Few of the pioneers in this development had much time for Byzantium, and the growth in publications on the archaeology and material culture of the eastern Mediterranean in late antiquity has led to a distinct turn in scholarship away from Constantinople and from the questions traditionally associated with early Byzantium. An enormous literature continues on the periodization of late antiquity, but much of it is motivated more by the question of when the ancient world ended, or the Roman empire fell, than by any concern for the continuity or

1 Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150–750. From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* (London 1971).

2 A. Giardina, 'Esplosione di tardoantico', *Studi Storici* 40.1 (1999) 157–80, with discussion by G.W. Bowersock and others at *Studi Storici* 45 (2004) 5–46; see also Peter Brown et al., 'The world of late antiquity revisited', *Symbolae Osloenses* 72 (1997) 5–90; reactions to Giardina by G. W. Bowersock and others in E. Lo Cascio (ed.) *Studi Storici* 45.1 (2004) 5–46.

3 See Chris Wickham, 'Marx, Sherlock Holmes and late Roman commerce', *Journal of Roman Studies* 78 (1988) 183–93 (review discussion of A. Carandini (ed.), *Società Romana e Impero Tardoantico* III. *Le Merci, Gli Insediamenti* (Rome and Bari 1986)).

otherwise of Byzantium.⁴ Given these developments it is not surprising that several Byzantinists currently argue that Byzantium ‘began’ only in the seventh century or thereabouts. This view is strengthened by the turn in the scholarship away from political and narrative history based primarily on textual evidence in favour of material culture and questions such as urbanism, settlement and language – a turn that has also made possible a secular approach as against the preoccupation with religion and specifically with Orthodoxy that still pervades some of the literature on Byzantium. However, the periodization of ‘late antiquity’ is far from settled, as we shall see, and I shall argue here that the ‘explosion’ of late antiquity has brought with it a real identity crisis for Byzantium.

The sixth century

Given this shift towards the east and away from political history, and with the entry into the mix of large numbers of new scholars, new journals and new research projects and publications series whose focus is anything but Byzantine, the sixth century as a topic has also been somewhat sidelined. It was already controversial among Byzantinists – was it the end of the Roman empire or just possibly the beginning of Byzantium?⁵ Gibbon is not the only historian who has found the sixth century puzzling,⁶ while recent publications insisting on a fifth-century fall of the Roman empire in the west also leave the sixth-century east exposed. It still seemed natural in 2000 for the final additional volume of the new Cambridge Ancient History (note the title) to end at about the same date as A. H. M. Jones’s *Later Roman Empire*,⁷ that is, AD 600 as against 602 respectively, allowing both works to end with a flourish with the sixth century. Now, in contrast, such a choice invites criticism for failing to include the great events of the early seventh century, including the emergence of Islam.

Central to the sixth century is the reign of Justinian, yet, as has been noted, it is striking that despite numerous shorter treatments the years since the first issue of *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* have not seen another work on the scale of E. Stein’s

4 See among many publications the group of articles in *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1 (2008), with A. Marcone, ‘La tarda antichità o della difficoltà delle periodizzazioni,’ *Studi Storici* (2004) 25–36; Averil Cameron, ‘The ‘long’ late antiquity. A late-twentieth century model?’ in T. P. Wiseman (ed), *Classics in Progress*, British Academy Centenary volume (Oxford 2002) 165–91.

5 See P. Allen and E. Jeffreys (eds), *The Sixth Century: End or Beginning?* (Brisbane 1996); M. Maas (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge 2005) is designed to supply an overview rather than pose questions of periodization.

6 Averil Cameron, ‘Gibbon and Justinian’, in R. McKitterick and R. Quinault (eds), *Edward Gibbon and Empire* (Cambridge 1997) 34–52.

7 Averil Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins and Michael Whitby (eds), *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, AD 425–600*, Cambridge Ancient History XIV (Cambridge 2000); A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602. A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey*, 2 vols. (Oxford 1964).

Histoire du Bas-Empire II, published in French in 1959.⁸ Why is this? Part of the answer may be in the decline of narrative and political history that has prevailed in the last few decades, with its more synchronic as well as more cultural approach.⁹ Nor has administrative history been much in vogue among English-speaking scholars,¹⁰ though it should be noted that this has not been the case in Italy and elsewhere. More recently one can detect a return to political and military narrative, alongside a focus on religious violence.¹¹ When he does make an appearance, Justinian currently tends to receive a bad press as tyrannical and deluded, if not quite in the terms in which he was presented by Tony Honoré, who likened him to Stalin.¹² For some the real heirs to Roman ideals are the Goths, not the Romans who invaded Italy under Justinian,¹³ and for most the idea of a seriously intended reconquest is dead in the water, together with that of the sixth century as a hinge between antiquity and Byzantium.¹⁴

One should also note the obstinate persistence of the idea of sixth-century Greek history-writing as ‘classicising’. Hence in some way the sixth century was not really Byzantine (a view strengthened by Anthony Kaldellis’ often-expressed view that Byzantium was always Roman, despite his willingness to use the terms Byzantine and Byzantium in

8 The nearest, though not on the same scale, is perhaps H. Leppin, *Justinian. Das christliche Experiment* (Stuttgart 2011); Stein’s work does not appear in the bibliography. Of course Justinian and the sixth century make an appearance in works of wider scale, for instance Averil Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins and M. Whitby (eds), *The Cambridge Ancient History XIV* (Cambridge 2000); C. Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome. A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (London 2009) or P. Sarris, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam* (Oxford 2011), or Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, c. 395–700*, 2nd rev. ed. (London 2011), and in introductions to Byzantium, for example Averil Cameron, *The Byzantines* (Oxford 2006); D. Stathakopoulos, *A Short History of the Byzantine Empire* (London 2014); J. Harris, *The Lost World of Byzantium* (New Haven 2015). M. Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians. Kontingenzerfahrung und Kontingenzbewältigung im 6. Jh. n. Chr.*, Hypomnemata 147, 2nd ed. (Göttingen 2004) deals in detail with the sixth century but from the angle of catastrophes and contingencies.

9 See n. 24 below. In an interesting recent discussion Anthony Kaldellis argues against the current emphasis on discourse analysis: ‘Late antiquity dissolves’, in a *Marginalia* Forum on Late Antiquity and the Humanities (<http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/late-antiquity-and-the-new-humanities-an-open-forum/> Sept. 18, 2015). It is worth noting that Brown’s *World of Late Antiquity* is very much a work of social history rather than discourse analysis.

10 Though see C. Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge, Mass. 2004). In contrast the nature of the late antique and early Byzantine economy has been well represented, for instance by J. Banaji, *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity. Gold, Labour and Aristocratic Dominance* (Oxford 2007) and P. Sarris, *Economy and Society in the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge 2006); and for social and economic issues under Justinian see P. N. Bell, *Social Conflict in the Age of Justinian. Its Nature, Management and Mediation* (Oxford 2013).

11 Below, n. 28.

12 T. Honoré, *Tribonian* (London 1978).

13 J. J. Arnold, *Theoderic and The Imperial Roman Restoration* (Cambridge 2014).

14 Though see P. Athanassiadi, *Vers la pensée unique. La montée de l’intolérance dans l’Antiquité tardive* (Paris 2010), for whom Justinian’s reign was a ‘Rubicon’ leading to Byzantine bigotry.

book titles and elsewhere).¹⁵ Here I should record how grateful I felt myself to Anthony Bryer who welcomed me into the fold of the Byzantine symposia in the late sixties and seventies, when I was working on Procopius and Agathias and was generally perceived as a classicist.¹⁶ This was before the idea of 'late antiquity' had taken hold. Sixth-century 'classicising' historians were approached in terms of biography and reliability – how far they conveyed reliable historical information, an approach also extended with negative effects to hagiography and chronicles, and enshrined in Jones' *Later Roman Empire*, which even now remains in many ways the fundamental guide.

However, the scene has since shifted dramatically, and applying the classicising model to sixth-century writers can now only take us so far. It has been replaced for many by a closer consideration of the texts themselves and their internal dynamics. Historians will always want to ask what useful evidence can be obtained from ancient and Byzantine writers, but they must now do so from a position that recognizes the complexity and the literary subtlety of their compositions.¹⁷ Nowhere is this more necessary than in the case of Procopius, whose works still dominate our understanding of the sixth century, and here too one can see the tectonic plates moving. Multi-author volumes published and in progress contain papers on narrativity¹⁸ as well as *realia*, and if out of Procopius' three works the *Buildings* still most eludes classification,¹⁹ at least consciousness has been raised, and historians and literary scholars now have to come together.²⁰

15 Especially in A. Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium. The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge 2008) and see Kaldellis, *Ethnography after Antiquity. Foreign Lands and Peoples in Byzantine Literature* (Philadelphia 2013). Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic. People and Power in New Rome* (Cambridge, Mass. 2015) puts a sustained argument for Byzantium as Roman, with a further volume promised, but Kaldellis nevertheless also floats the idea of an 'early Byzantium' starting in the second century AD (204, n. 15).

16 Cf. Averil Cameron, *Agathias* (Oxford 1970); 'Early Byzantine *Kaiserkritik*: two case histories', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 3 (1977) 1–17.

17 On which see R. Macrides, ed., *History as Literature in Byzantium*, Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies Publications 15 (Farnham 2010); Wolf Liebeschuetz argues for a qualitative decline in sixth-century literature, which he ascribes not least to the influence of Christianity: J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City* (Oxford 2001).

18 For which see I. Nilsson, 'To narrate the events of the past. Byzantine historians, and historians on Byzantium', in J. Burke (ed.), *Byzantine Narrative. Papers in Honour of Roger Scott* (Melbourne 2006) 47–58.

19 See the collection of papers in *Antiquité tardive* 8 (2000); views of the *Buildings* now have to be revised in the light of work by F. Montinaro on the two editions of the text, for which see Montinaro, *Études sur l'évergétisme impérial à Byzance* (Diss. École Pratique des Hautes Études-Sorbonne, 2013), and further discussion in Montinaro, 'Power, taste and the outsider: Procopius and the *Buildings* revisited', in G. Greatrex and H. Elton (eds), *Shifting Genres in Late Antiquity* (Farnham 2015) 191–206, in a section consisting of four papers under the title 'Procopius and literature in the sixth-century eastern empire'.

20 Expected: a Brill *Companion to Procopius* and the papers from a conference on Procopius held in Oxford in January, 2014, in press as C. Lillington-Martin and E. Turquois (eds), *Procopius: (New) Interpretations and Methodologies* (Ashgate), with several papers on literary approaches and a particularly relevant contribution by P. van Nuffelen, 'The wor(l)ds of Procopius'.

The concept of classicising history necessarily involves the question of genre, which I emphasized when writing of Procopius several decades ago, but this too is now subject to revisionism.²¹ Anthony Kaldellis' much-cited *Procopius of Caesarea*²² also calls for a literary approach, though his is based on the old question of what the author 'really' believed. Carrying such an approach to its limits, Kaldellis dismisses the *Buildings* altogether as being insincere, based on the dubious premise that what modern critics should be looking for is 'sincerity'. Whether there was a specifically 'late antique aesthetic' is also a current question.²³ Even if not – and behind such an assumption lurks the assumption of a contrasting 'Byzantine aesthetic' – a methodological approach to the writers of the sixth century based primarily on classical imitation and historical reliability will no longer serve, any more than an approach to the sixth century or other periods based only on what some call 'traditional text-based history'. In answer to Kaldellis, late antiquity is far from 'dissolving', but approaches to the hinge period of the sixth century do seem to be in a particular state of flux.

One of the hallmarks of the mass of publications on late antiquity has been the amount of emphasis placed on religion, not least in the wake of the belated discovery by classicists and late Roman scholars alike of the huge amount of Christian and Jewish texts ripe for their attention. The field has recently been expanded by some to include Sasanian and other material, and to recognize and seek to incorporate Neoplatonic thought and writing as another important strand. This move brings about its own further dynamics and responses. Thus religion in late antiquity is often now interpreted within the frame of cultural history,²⁴ while many historians look for evidence of

21 Many interesting papers in Greatrex and Elton (eds), *Shifting Genres*; a major research project led by Peter Van Nuffelen is directed at the subject of historiography in this period, and see Van Nuffelen, 'Greek secular historians in late antiquity', review-discussion, *Histos* 9 (2015), ix–xv (online).

22 A. Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea. Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (Philadelphia 2004), discussed by Averil Cameron, 'Writing about Procopius then and now', in Lillington-Martin and Turquois (eds), *Procopius: (New) Interpretations and Methodologies*, with R. Scott, 'The literature of sixth-century Byzantium', in D. Sakel (ed.), *Byzantine Culture*, Papers from the Conference, Byzantine Days of Istanbul, May 21–23, 2010 (Ankara 2014) 45–57; see also I. Nilsson and R. Scott, 'Towards a new history of Byzantine literature: the case of historiography', *Classica et Mediaevalia* 58 (2007) 319–32.

23 See M. Formisano, 'Towards an aesthetic paradigm of late antiquity', *Antiquité Tardive* 15 (2007) 277–84, with Formisano, 'Late antiquity: new departures', in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature*, ed. R. J. Hexter and D. Townsend (Oxford 2012) 509–34 and cf. M. Formisano and T. Führer, with A.-L. Stock (eds), *Décadence. 'Decline and Fall' or 'Other Antiquity'?* (Heidelberg 2014), though see Van Nuffelen, 'The wor(l)ds of Procopius'.

24 See e.g. E. A. Clark, 'From patristics to early Christian studies,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, (ed.) S. A. Harvey and D. G. Hunter (Oxford 2008) 8–41; M. Vessey, 'Literature, patristics, early Christian writing,' *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, 55–58; D. B. Martin and P. Cox Miller (eds), *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies. Gender, Asceticism and Historiography* (Durham, NC 2005). M. Vessey, in V. Burrus, K. Haines-Eitzen, R. Lim, M. Vessey and E. A. Clark, review-discussion of E. A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text. Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, Mass. 2004) 812–36, at 826–30, refers to 'the new intellectual history'.

questioning, indifference, scepticism and even atheism.²⁵ There is an obvious resonance here for the later centuries of Byzantium, commonly if uncritically believed to be an overwhelmingly orthodox and even theocratic society.²⁶ Similarly, the turn towards emphasizing religious violence for which Kaldellis calls in his contribution to the *Marginalia* open forum²⁷ has already happened.²⁸ Finally negative features in late antiquity are a theme addressed at length by Mischa Meier, in a counter to the ‘benign’ late antiquity of which some have complained.²⁹

The turn to the east

Within or alongside this outpouring of publications on late antiquity we can detect another powerful trend, which I term the turn to the east, marked by enthusiasm for the complex culture of the eastern Mediterranean in the fifth to seventh centuries,³⁰ the

25 M. Humphries, with D. M. Gwynn, ‘The sacred and the secular: the presence or absence of Christian religious thought in secular writing in the late antique west’, and E. Jeffreys, ‘Literary genre or religious apathy? The presence or absence of theology and religious thought in secular writing in the late antique east’, both in D. M. Gwynn and S. Bangert (eds), *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity*, *Late Antique Archaeology* 6 (Leiden 2010) 493–509 and 511–22. Scepticism: P. Sarris, M. Dal Santo and P. Booth, eds., *An Age of Saints? Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity* (Leiden 2011); M. Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints’ Cult in the Age of Gregory the Great* (Oxford 2012); A. Kaldellis, ‘The hagiography of doubt and scepticism’, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography II: Genres and Contexts*, ed. S. Efthymiades (Farnham 2014) 453–77. Kaldellis’ many publications also seek to identify dissidence, following his penchant for the Straussian dissident philosopher and intellectual (Cameron, ‘Writing about Procopius then and now’). Atheism in the classical world: T. Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (London 2016).

26 Against: Averil Cameron, *Byzantine Matters* (Princeton 2014) chap. 5; Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic*.

27 ‘Euphemism and discursive amelioration will never fully occlude the fact that the later Roman Empire (sic) was the site of tremendous and unparalleled religious conflict’: in Kaldellis, ‘Late antiquity dissolves’ (as cited in n. 9 above).

28 M. Gaddis, *There is No Crime for Those who Have Christ* (Berkeley 2005); H. A. Drake (ed.), *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices* (Aldershot 2006); J. Hahn, *Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt: Studien zu den Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Christen, Heiden und Juden im Osten des Römischen Reiches (von Konstantin bis Theodosius II.)* (Berlin 2004); J. Hahn, S. Emmel and U. Gotter (eds), *From Temple to Church: Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity* (2008); T. Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia 2009).

29 Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*; stress on the role of apocalypticism in late antiquity points in the same direction: e.g. W. Brandes, ‘Anastasios *ho dikoros*. Endzeiterwartung und Kaiserkritik in Byzanz um 500 n. Chr.’, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 90 (1997) 24–63.

30 Indicative of this development is the fact that the work of such a leading Roman historian as Fergus Millar has focused for the last ten years on the themes of identity and community in the Near East in the period from the fifth to the seventh centuries, and especially the interplay of Greek and Syriac: his many essays on the subject are now collected in F. Millar, *Empire, Church and Society in the Late Roman Near East: Greeks, Jews, Syrians and Saracens*, *Late Antique History and Religion* 10 (Leuven 2015), and see Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire: Power and Belief under Theodosius II (408–450)* (Berkeley 2006). Also indicative, and with longer chronological span, is A. Borrut et al. (ed), *Le Proche-Orient de Justinien aux Abbassides: peuplement et dynamiques spatiales*, Actes du colloque ‘Continuités de l’occupation entre les périodes byzantine et abbasside au Proche-Orient, VIIe–IXe siècles,’ Paris, 18–20 octobre 2007 (Turnhout 2011).

incorporation of Syriac as well as Greek material and increasingly the tendency to bring early Islam into the late antique frame, aided in this narrative by the claim of an overriding late antique monotheism and further complicated by the rising theme of ‘Abrahamic religions’.³¹ The same trend is reflected in the work of some Islamicists, who are themselves presenting Islam as a religion of late antiquity.³² The general turn to the east is also a product of the huge amount of archaeological material that has become available in the last generation, but in addition the new vigour that has manifested itself in Sasanian studies and late antique Judaism has fed into a rising interest in the Byzantine-Sasanian wars under Chosroes II and the events of the Persian conquest of Jerusalem and the Near East in the early seventh century.³³ From here it seems only a small and natural step to the incorporation of early Islam into the late antique world view.³⁴

Byzantium dissolves?

It would be tedious to repeat all the arguments that have filled academic journals in recent years about the periodisation of late antiquity. Peter Brown’s original endpoint in *The World of Late Antiquity* was AD 750, coinciding with the fall of the Umayyads and the ‘Abbasid revolution’, and while it did not directly address the questions about the emergence of Islam that are currently such a preoccupation, the book played its part in the turn to the east, not least by drawing heavily on Sasanian material. Brown’s later book, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, extended its coverage to AD 1000 and also ranged widely, but its title indicated a different focus.³⁵ In contrast, Garth Fowden, who also adopts the year 1000 as a turning point, sees it as the end of late antiquity and firmly concentrates on the east, so much so indeed that he includes Islam under the

31 On which see A. Silverstein and G. G. Stroumsa (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Abrahamic Religions* (Oxford 2015), with G. G. Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 2015); this growing subject is supported by newly funded chairs at both Oxford and Cambridge.

32 The general case is set out very clearly by R. G. Hoyland, ‘Islam as a late antique religion’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. S. F. Johnson, (Oxford 2012), 1053–77; in terms of Qur’anic analysis a key scholar in this regard is Angelika Neuwirth, for instance see her *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: ein europäischer Zugang*, 3rd ed. (Berlin 2013). For a different take on Islam as late antique see A. al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and his People* (Cambridge 2014).

33 Key publications include B. Flusin, *Saint Anastase le Perse et l’histoire de la Palestine au début du VIII^e siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris 1992) and more recently J. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis. Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford 2010), and see G. Dagron and V. Déroche, ‘Juifs et chrétiens dans l’Orient du VII^e siècle’, *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991) 17–273 and Averil Cameron, ‘Blaming the Jews: the seventh-century invasions of Palestine in context’, *Travaux et Mémoires* 14 (*Mélanges Gilbert Dagron*) (2002) 57–78.

34 Thus P. Sarris, *Empires of Faith. The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam, 500–700* (Oxford 2011), combines a Mediterranean-wide perspective, discussion of the fall of the Roman empire in the west and a periodization of 500–700, which includes the rise of Islam.

35 P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200–1000* (Oxford 1996, 2nd ed. 2003).

Umayyads and the Abbasids but effectively leaves out Byzantium and Constantinople after about 600.³⁶ Such a focus fits well with the wider and essentially apologetic enterprise of presenting Islam in a positive light. It is explicitly shared for example in the ‘Global late antiquities’ project recently launched by early Islamicists at Boston University, which calls for a ‘holistic approach to late antiquity’ that can include ‘both Europe and Islam as the heirs of the biblical legacy of ancient Israel and the classical legacy of Greece and Rome’.³⁷ The project statement speaks of the history of Europe and the need for a ‘more integrated and nuanced perspective on “Western civilization” and its origins in the shared heritage and conjoined development of the cultures of Late Antiquity’. But as often, Byzantium is left marooned.³⁸ Worse, such an emphasis is in danger of playing to the very denigration of Byzantium that Byzantinists have been trying so hard to overcome.

The seventh century

In responding to these issues from the Byzantine point of view, the seventh century is no less critical than the sixth. It was, after all, the century of the Persian occupation of the Near East, the end of the Sasanian empire, the rise of Islam and the establishment of the Umayyad state. It was a difficult time for Byzantium, faced with defeat, major military threats and economic loss. Yet Byzantium survived.

It is certainly tempting to see this period as the one in which the later Byzantine state found its real beginning. Yet there are losses as well as gains in any periodization. In this case too the publications of recent years indicate new ways of looking at the seventh century that do not necessarily turn on whether it was ‘Byzantine’ or ‘late antique’ or late or east Roman, and which offer alternatives to the earlier emphasis on defeat and disaster.³⁹

Oddly enough, it might seem, given the unwillingness of many late antique scholars to confront theology and their corresponding wish to collapse religious issues into cultural history, theology and doctrinal issues feature prominently in these developments. Of course patristic scholars and theologians have always continued to write on these

36 G. Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad. The First Millennium Refocused* (Princeton 2014). Philip Rousseau notes other examples of this periodization in Can ‘late antiquity’ be saved?, his contribution to the *Marginalia* Open Forum (as cited in n. 9 above), albeit without the determinedly eastern focus.

37 <http://www.mizanproject.org>, accessed 29.9.15, citing Fowden’s book with approval as a way of combating the ‘clash of civilizations’ approach. The contrary impulse can also be found in some recent publications on late antiquity which lay stress on violence. Given the fraught nature of the subject of Islamic origins, not to mention that of the date of the Qur’an, it is hardly surprising if late antiquity is pressed into service for other ends.

38 For this tendency in general, see Averil Cameron, ‘The absence of Byzantium’, *Nea Hestia*, Jan. 2008, 4–59 (English and Greek).

39 See J. F. Haldon, *The Empire that Would Not Die. The Paradox of East Roman Survival, c. 640–740 CE*, The Carl Newell Jackson Lectures at Harvard, 2014, (Cambridge Mass. 2016), in comparison with Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century. The Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge 1990, rev. ed. 1997).

subjects, but we can now see also a much greater willingness among some late antique and Byzantine historians to address what used to be considered highly specialist questions rather than ones that fall within the purview of general history. In part I would suggest that this is a natural offshoot of the new emphasis on writers of the eastern provinces, including those writing in Syriac. In addition the separation of the Chalcedonian and Miaphysite churches from the sixth century on has become a major subject for historians,⁴⁰ like the local reactions to the Persian occupation of Palestine, and the role of Christian communities in the Sasanian empire.⁴¹ Another landmark in recent scholarship is provided by the publication of detailed commentaries and translations of sixth and seventh century councils,⁴² together with an increasing awareness of and interest in the modes and techniques of argumentation used here and in other contemporary works. These included the huge contemporary production of florilegia of proof texts and the development of anti-heretical and anti-Jewish themes. The enormous emphasis currently placed on Maximus the Confessor as an important historical figure as well as a very major theologian is yet another indicator of this trend, much stimulated by the publication some years ago of a critical edition of the acts of the Lateran Synod of 649, which made clear the central role played by Maximus in this event, as well as the edition of a hostile Syriac *Life* of Maximus which, if reliable, changes existing views of Maximus in dramatic ways.⁴³ The crisis and division caused by seventh-century attempts to

40 See especially V.-L. Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (Oxford 2008).

41 Christians in the Sasanian empire: A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: the School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia 2006); P. Wood, *'We have no King but Christ': Christian Political Thought in Greater Syria on the Eve of the Arab Conquest (c.400–585)* (Oxford 2011); Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert: Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq* (Oxford 2013).

42 Chalcedon (AD 451): R. Price and M. Gaddis, trans. with introduction, *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, 3 vols., Translated Texts for Historians 45 (Liverpool 2005); Constantinople II (553): R. Price, trans. with notes and an introduction, *The Acts of the Council of Constantinople of 553: with Related Texts on the Three Chapters Controversy*, 2 vols., Translated Texts for Historians 51 (Liverpool 2009); Sixth Council (681): M. Jankowiak and R. Price, trans. with notes, *The Acts of the Third Council of Constantinople (681)*, Translated Texts for Historians (Liverpool, in press); for sixth-century ecclesiastical issues see also C. Chazelle and C. Cubitt (eds), *The Crisis of the Oikoumene: the Three Chapters and the Failed Quest for Unity in the Sixth-Century Mediterranean* (Turnhout 2007).

43 Lateran council: *Concilium Lateranense a. 649 celebratum*, ed. Rudolf Riedinger, *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* 2.1 (Berlin 1984); R. Price, with P. Booth and C. Cubitt, trans. with notes, *The Acts of the Lateran Synod of 649*, Translated Texts for Historians 61 (Liverpool 2014); Syriac *Life* of Maximus: S. P. Brock, 'An early Syriac Life of Maximus the Confessor', *Analecta Bollandiana* 91 (1973), 299–346 (though not accepted by all); see also P. Allen and B. Neil (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford 2015), containing in particular an important new chronology of the many works of Maximus and of his own movements, drawing on the Syriac *Life*, by M. Jankowiak and P. Booth, 'A new date-list of the works of Maximus the Confessor', *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, 19–83; P. Booth, *Crisis of Empire. Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Antiquity* (Berkeley 2014) (a book by a historian which takes full account of the theological issues of the period); redating of the Monothelite controversy: see M. Jankowiak, 'The invention of Dyothelitism', *Studia Patristica* 63 (2013) 335–42.

impose the doctrine that Christ had one will (Monothelitism) have been brought into sharper relief. Religious unity was and remained a prime concern for emperors in the seventh century just as in the sixth, and as a result of this recent work we are in a far better position to understand the dynamics involved. I would go further and claim that a better understanding of the seventh-century theological struggles is essential for any revisionist account of Byzantine iconoclasm.⁴⁴

What is to be done, or, what's in a name?

Most scholars would agree that the term Byzantium can safely be applied to the seventh century, even if finding a starting point is not so easy. Nor is it easy to accommodate within a Byzantine framework the ever-increasing mass of information about the eastern provinces or the momentous events that took place in the east in the seventh century. Yet after all, most historians have to make difficult choices, especially if they are writing about periods of rapid change. It is true that the very term 'Byzantium' may still carry unfortunate overtones, but the answer is to rehabilitate it, not to avoid it, and to recognise that any other choice will also have its drawbacks. More significant are the suspicion felt towards Byzantium among some late antique scholars⁴⁵ and the frequent assertion that Constantinople was cut off from the eastern provinces by the Arab conquests or that the latter immediately became isolated from Byzantium. The truth was more complex than that. The associations of the term Byzantium can certainly still get in the way, and there are still genuine arguments to be made about periodization and definition, but these are more an internal matter within historiography than real issues. They should not lead to the exclusion of Byzantium, whether from narratives of transition focused on the eastern Mediterranean and pointing towards Islam, or from narratives of a transition from classical antiquity to western Europe, pointing inexorably to the Enlightenment. As ways of understanding transitions and the sweep of history on a wider scale, both narratives are deficient, and both rely on hidden assumptions and prejudices.

I have pointed here to one of these narratives, which in my view threatens to sideline Byzantium. It seems clear that the overall problem has much to do with the ways in which academic disciplines work: few of those who work on late antiquity see Byzantium as relevant to them. What's to be done is up to Byzantinists, who are

44 Theology is played down by L. Brubaker and J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850. A History* (Cambridge 2011), especially 782–87, and compare also the headings and arrangement of material in their earlier presentation of the sources: *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850: The Sources, an Annotated Survey* (Aldershot 2001); both books are written from a historical-materialist perspective.

45 It should be pointed out that in many archaeological publications about the Near East, especially by Israeli scholars, the term 'Byzantine' is used descriptively to refer to the chronological period supposedly ending with the advent of Islamic rule, in a periodization that makes a sharp break with the Arab conquests; however recent research emphasizes continuity into the Islamic period: see A. Walmsley, *Early Islamic Syria. An Archaeological Assessment* (London 2007).

probably tired of these questions and just want to get on with their work. Most of them are already used to negotiating these various problems, and in many cases, too, the same scholar can, and indeed has to, play to both late antique and Byzantine constituencies. The cake can be cut in different ways. But we must be careful that parts are not dropped altogether.