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Edited by Thomas F. X. Noble and Julia M. H. Smith

Excerpt

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Introduction: Christendom, c. 600

PETER BROWN

The Kingdom and the kingdoms

A little after 680 CE, Julian, bishop of Toledo, the capital of the Visigothic kingdom of Spain, was challenged to answer a constant objection made by the Jews against Christianity. Christians were misguided to think that, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah – the “Christ,” the Anointed One – had come. The Messiah had not come. The world was only five thousand years old. The sixth age in which the Messiah would arrive had not yet even begun. The recent centuries lacked meaning. They were a blank space, a time of waiting for the arrival of the true Christ – the Anointed One of God.

To the bishop of Toledo, his imagined Jewish interlocutors could not have been more wrong. History was already tinged with excitement. The Messiah had come. Christ had been born in Bethlehem in the days of the Emperor Augustus. His coming to earth had left a palpable trace. For it had coincided with a moment of almost supernatural quiet, throughout the Mediterranean world, associated with the foundation of the Roman Empire. Civil wars ceased. Peace returned to the cities. Relieved of military emergencies, the civilian population returned to the fields: “and the business of war was delegated to the Roman legions alone, to be conducted against barbarian nations.”¹ For Julian, the peace of the Roman world in the age of Augustus, now over six centuries in the past, had been nothing less than the footprint on time of the incarnate God. The peace of Rome itself had not lasted. For Julian, the present age was an age of war. But that distant and momentary lull in the laws of history proved to Julian that the Jews were wrong. The Messiah had come. His arrival had been marked, in time, by a thin fleck of peace. From that time on, the world had entered its last, sixth age. And this sixth age was to be lived out under the shadow of a vast, invisible empire. The entire world now belonged to the Kingdom of Christ: “The Lord has made bare His holy arm in

¹ Julian of Toledo, *De comprobatione sextae aetatis*, I.13, 160.

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the sight of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.”²

What we moderns call (with deliberate vagueness) the “spread of Christianity” was, for Julian of Toledo, the proclamation, through the Catholic Church (and through no other body admitted by him), of the fact that the Kingdom of Christ had happened, and could be seen to have happened, “in the sight of all the nations . . . and [to] all the ends of the earth.”³

It was not a claim calculated to convince a contemporary with any degree of geographical knowledge. The Jews raised the fact that many “barbarian” nations had plainly not become Christian. Julian’s answer to such skeptics is revealing. He divided the world into two zones. The first was fully Christian; and it was fully Christian because it was ruled by Christian rulers. “For although there are still unbelieving peoples in some regions, they are nonetheless unable to escape the Lordship of Christ. For they are suppressed by rulers in whom it is known that Christ already dwells through their faith in Him.”⁴

The second zone formed a less well-defined penumbra of the first: “For nor do I think [Julian continues] that there is any population left which does not know of the name of Christ. And although it may not have a preacher [of the Gospel present among them] it cannot but know of Christ from what it has heard from other nations.”⁵

It is with this notion of a double zone within the single, overarching territory of the world-wide Kingdom of Christ that we must begin our account of what we now call “Christendom” in 600 CE.

Julian was already out of date when he wrote. One could not guess from his pages that, by 680, Muslim armies had already entered North Africa and would soon pass into Spain. But he was a scholarly bishop whose eyes in the year 680 looked at the world through the lens of books. For such a person, Christianity still lived in the shadow of empire. It was at its most confident and populous within the structures of two great empires who had (until recently) controlled most of the agrarian land of the western hemisphere from the Atlantic coast of Julian’s Spain to the edge of Central Asia and Afghanistan – the Roman Empire and the Sasanian, Persian Empire. It was of these empires that contemporaries first thought when they contrasted the grandiose Kingdom of Christ with the “kingdoms of the world.”

2 Isa. 52:10.

3 Julian of Toledo, *De comprobatione sextae aetatis*, I.13, 160.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., I.14, 161.

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The sixth century had shown that the age of empires was far from over. Under the Emperor Justinian (527–65) the Roman Empire, ruled from Constantinople, reasserted its rights to large areas of the western Mediterranean – to much of Italy, to North Africa, and even to parts of Spain. Even outside the frontiers of the newly reconquered imperial territories, in Visigothic Spain and in the Frankish kingdoms, strong kingship still wore a recognizably “Roman” face. And a “Roman” face was a face borrowed from Constantinople. With a population of over half a million, Constantinople had become overwhelmingly the largest city in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. In Gaul and Spain, the Roman Empire, as it continued at Constantinople, had remained the preeminent model for earthly power at its most ebullient, formidable, and God-fearing.⁶

In western Asia, the Sasanian Empire (which embraced Iraq, Iran, and parts of Central Asia) showed that it was the equal of the Roman Empire. Under Chosroes I Anoshirwan (530–79) and again under Chosroes II Aparwez, “the Victorious” (590–628), the Sasanian Empire entered into a period of military and diplomatic confrontation with Constantinople which stretched throughout the Middle East from the northern Caucasus to Yemen. It was a colossal confrontation. It reached so deep into Central Asia and Inner Asia that it stirred the interest of the Chinese court in the affairs of the distant West for the first time since the days of Marcus Aurelius (121–80).⁷

The vast horizons still embraced by these “kingdoms of the world” imparted a sense of immensity to the Christian conviction that a yet wider Kingdom of Christ stood, as it were, as the invisible backdrop to the history of western Eurasia. How the various “kingdoms of the world” related to the Kingdom of Christ was a matter of concern to contemporaries. In around 550, at the far end of the Mediterranean, over two thousand miles from Toledo, a merchant and amateur theologian from Antioch engaged the same questions as did Bishop Julian. Cosmas (later called Cosmas the India-Merchant) was an experienced traveler. He had lived in Alexandria. He had traveled as far as Axum (Ethiopia) at the southern end of the Red Sea. He had even sailed on the Indian Ocean. For a subject of the Roman Empire, his religious loyalties were somewhat eccentric. Cosmas favored the views of the Christians of Persia, and spoke with admiration of the teaching of a converted Iranian, Mar Aba, who had traveled all the way from Mesopotamia to Alexandria and Constantinople in

6 Ward-Perkins, “Constantinople.”

7 Mikawaya and Kollautz, “Ein Dokument zum Fernhandel.”

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the 520s before returning to Ctesiphon, near modern Baghdad, to become the head of the Church of the East.⁸

Cosmas's views on the Kingdom of Christ were conventional. The Kingdom of Christ alone was the truly "eternal" Kingdom spoken of by the prophet Daniel: "His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away."⁹

Cosmas took for granted that, in some way, a shadow of that eternity had fallen on the Roman Empire. Because Christ had been born within its territories, this kingdom had received special "privileges" from God. Though frequently damaged, for its sins, by barbarian invasion, it would last until the end of time. The world-wide acclaim of the rulers of Constantinople was known to Cosmas from his experience of the trade routes of Asia. He reported with pride that, as far away as Ceylon, the golden *solidus* of the Roman emperors was regarded as the best currency in the world.

This did not mean that Cosmas viewed the Roman Empire of his days as a "universal" empire: the Kingdom of Christ was alone in that. But it was unbeatable. Its unshakeable prestige among the nations ensured that the Christian faith would never be "narrowed down" to one region alone.¹⁰

Faced with the Persian empire, Cosmas propounded a more "de-centered" view of the world than that which reigned in Constantinople. He found a place for Persia, also, in the Kingdom of Christ. Persia was not simply the traditional barbarian antithesis to the Christian empire. Though not a Christian state, the Sasanian Empire had a role in God's providence. For the Magi had come to Christ from the East. By bringing gifts to the newborn Christ in Bethlehem, they had paid homage to him as the true Emperor of the world on behalf of all Persia. This act of homage had given the Sasanian Empire certain "privileges."¹¹ The Christian church within its boundaries could be treated as the equal, in prestige and even in numbers, of the churches of the West.¹²

In this "de-centered" view of the world, Cosmas was in touch with the realities of his time. The Roman Empire, though privileged, was one state among many. Its universal claims had been tacitly refused by the western kingdoms of the Franks and the Visigoths. In the East, the Sasanian Empire had shown itself to be on a par with Rome. The "Church of the East" was so called precisely because it was the Christian church within the territories of the Persian Empire, the "Empire of the Sublime Region of the

8 Wolska-Conus, *La topographie chrétienne*.

9 Dan. 7:14.

10 Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographie chrétienne*, 2.74–77, 389–93.

11 Monneret de Villard, *Le leggende orientali sui Magi evangelici*.

12 Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographie chrétienne*, 2.76, 391.

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East.” The Kingdom of Christ now towered above a world made up of many kingdoms.

We need only look eastward, to the Christian communities within the Sasanian Empire to which Mar Aba returned after his tour of the West, in order to appreciate how much the Christians of this time, in all places, still thought of themselves as living in the shadow of empire. The King of Kings and his aristocracy were loyal to their traditional Zoroastrian religion. But they had long extended a tolerance to the religious beliefs of their non-Iranian subjects which was far greater than any extended in Constantinople to religious dissidents.¹³ As a result, the Sasanian Empire stretched above the Christianity of the East as distant, but as much taken for granted as the sky. When Mar Aba summoned a council in 544 to impose order on the Church of the East, the council met at the imperial capital of Ctesiphon and at the direct behest of Chosroes I: “In the Year of the Victory of the sweet, the merciful, the beneficent Khusro [Chosroes], the King of Kings . . . by the care of this new Cyrus, who is greater than all kings . . . to whom Christ has suggested to constantly lavish gifts upon His church.”¹⁴

Though largely concentrated at this time in the towns and villages of northern Iraq, in the foothills of the Zagros, and in the trading posts of the Persian Gulf, the Church of the East partook in the vast horizons of the Sasanian Empire.¹⁵ Mar Aba’s spiritual empire stretched as far as Zerang and Qandahar, in modern Afghanistan – over a thousand miles to the east of Iraq – where he was helped in his negotiations with the local bishops by the good graces of “Suren of Beth Garmai [northern Iraq] the Keeper of the Queen’s Camels.” There was a Christian bishop at Merv, the great oasis city on the far eastern frontier of the Sasanian Empire.

Thus, it was as a religion protected by the structures of the Persian Empire “of the Sublime Region of the East,” that the “Church of the East” (which has come to be known to us as the Nestorian Church) entered the world of Central Asia. A generation after 600, at a time when the pattern of world-empire itself changed, with the dramatic rise of Islam and the consequent reconfiguration of the lands between Merv and China, the “Nestorian” church moved yet further east, to establish itself in China. It did so in the train of upper-class refugees from Persia, diplomats, and career generals. Christian monks and clergymen entered Hsian-fu in 635 less as “missionaries” than as part of the shattered remnants

¹³ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire.”

¹⁴ Council of Ctesiphon (544), *Synodicon orientale*, 315.

¹⁵ Fiey, *Communautés syriaques*.

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of the Sasanian Empire within whose framework a vigorous Christian church had grown up and expanded far into Asia in the fifth and sixth centuries.¹⁶

“Rulers in whom it is known that Christ
already dwells”¹⁷

What emerges from this brief tour of the horizons of Christianity in around the year 600 is the crucial importance of what were seen as the imperial “heartlands” within which Christianity had grown to prominence. Whether it was in the post-Roman kingdoms of the West, in the surviving Roman Empire of Constantinople, or in the Sasanian territories of the “Empire of the East,” the majority of Christians still moved in a world where grandiose imperial structures seemed the norm. They were a fitting foreground for the invisible Kingdom of Christ.

It is easy to forget how long-established Christianity felt itself to be in such a world. Antiquity was now on the side of Christianity. By 600, the conversion of Constantine (in 312) lay three centuries in the past. The Roman Empire had already been a Christian empire for almost as long as it had been pagan. In Rome, the most splendid basilicas of all (Saint Peter’s and the Lateran) had been built in the reign of Constantine. Their income was assured by complexes of estates in the Roman countryside and elsewhere, whose title deeds, preserved in the archives for the clergy of this time to read, reached back almost three hundred years. In a very ancient Italy, the boundaries of these estates themselves had not changed since the days of the Roman Republic.

But it was not only around the Mediterranean that Christianity had aged gracefully. In Trier, near the Rhine frontier, the awesome dimensions of the city’s first cathedral (probably built by Constantine’s pious son), its naves supported on gigantic columns of black Rhineland granite, was a standing reminder, in an age of smaller and less stable states, of what the concentrated power and wealth of a united Christian empire had been like. It was repaired at the end of the sixth century by an aristocrat bishop, Nicetius.

Nicetius himself represented a class with a long past. He came from a group of Christian aristocratic families, some of whom were proud to trace their descent back four hundred years, to a senator who had been martyred at Lyons in 177. As the writings of Gregory, bishop of Tours (d. 594), made plain, the clerical aristocracy of Gaul associated themselves with a “deep”

¹⁶ Pelliot and Forte, *L’inscription nestorienne*; Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 279–85.

¹⁷ Julian of Toledo, *De comprobatione sextae aetatis*, 1.13, 160.

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past, associated with the tombs of martyrs and saints (many of them in elegant classical marble) which lay in ancient crypts and in family mausolea scattered in Roman cemeteries outside the cities. Many such saints were the ancestors of living bishops. Their history led back into the long past of Christian Gaul. This continuity meant more to a man such as Gregory than did the conventional turning points of Roman history. Gregory, for instance, seemed oblivious to the end of the Roman Empire.¹⁸

For Gregory and his contemporaries the great mutation had already occurred. They lived in a world of Christian cities, under Christian rulers. His works contain a Latin translation of a legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. The Seven Sleepers retired to a cave at the time of the persecution of Christians in the third century. They woke up again in the fifth century. There was one sign of the times which instantly drew their attention. The Sign of the Cross was carved above the gates of every city. They saw what any sixth-century Christian of the Mediterranean and much of the Middle East could have seen every day.¹⁹

Christianity as a whole was far from being exclusively an urban religion in the year 600. But it had remained a religion whose “nerve centers” had remained urban bishoprics, many of which dated back for half a millennium. Cities still stood for solidity. In Roman Britain, where urban life had always been tenuous, Christianity had mutated in such a way as to become almost invisible to outsiders by the year 600 – as we shall see. Once one crossed the Channel, the cities with their walls began, growing ever more dense as one reached the Mediterranean. Frankish Gaul had 116 bishoprics, Visigothic Spain had 66. With 237, for its relatively small size, Italy positively buzzed with bishops, as did North Africa, with 242, increasingly clustered along the eastern coastal regions. With over 680 bishops, the territories of the Roman Empire of Justinian and his successors remained the true center of gravity of the Christian world, especially as many of its cities were considerably larger than those of the West. Across the Roman frontier, the very different cities and large villages of the Sasanian Empire supported over 50 bishops. The church of Armenia could rally some 20 bishops, distributed, rather unevenly, according to the holdings of the noble families of the region.

With the exception of Lombard adventurers in northern and central Italy and the “stateless” chieftaincies of the Slavs who had moved into the Balkans under the hegemony of the nomadic pagan Avars, from the Euphrates to the

¹⁸ Mitchell, “Marking the Bounds.”

¹⁹ Gregory of Tours, *Passio sanctorum martyrum septem dormientium apud Ephysum*, 401.

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Channel coast, and even in western England and Wales, all organized society was headed by Christian rulers. The power and ideological pretensions of these states varied. But all thought of themselves as existing through the protection of Christ. All thought that the duty of a ruler was, at the very least, to secure the observance of Sunday and respect for other Christian festivals, to suppress pagan sacrifices, and to make sure that the Jewish communities in their midst did not get above themselves. The empire of Justinian was a model for them all because it appeared to do this more effectively than did any other kingdom.

Subjects of Justinian were left in little doubt that they lived in a Christian state. A mosaic on the floor of the tax office of Caesarea Maritima (on the coast of modern Israel) cites a blunt passage from St. Paul's *Letter to the Romans*: "If you would not fear the authority, do good."²⁰

Christian preaching upheld the authority of the ruler. Christian prayers, publicly offered at every liturgy, secured the safety of the empire. The divinely ordained "harmony" of Church and State, which Justinian had proclaimed in his legislation, was more than a rhetorical flourish. It grew from the ground up in 680 cities. Ecclesiastical and secular were inextricably mixed through the collaboration of the bishop and clergy with the local elites in order to handle the day-to-day business of government. The bishop was now a principal agent in the communication between the capital and the provinces.²¹ Imperial edicts on matters as thoroughly secular as the control of banditry would be received by the bishop and read out to the local council in the bishop's audience hall adjoining the Christian basilica. They would be posted on the walls of the church.²² In Gerasa (Jerash, Jordan), it was the bishop who built and ran the local jail: "to the advantage of the city."²³ As Severus, the patriarch of Antioch, told a local bishop in no uncertain terms in around 515: bishops were there to keep the cities going. "It is the duty of bishops to cut short and to restrain the unregulated movements of the mob . . . and to set themselves to maintain good order in the cities and to watch over the peaceful manner of those who are fed by their hand."²⁴

It is important to remember that the crushing load of administrative duties which Gregory the Great took over when he became pope in Rome (between 590 and 604) was in no ways unusual. It did not reflect any sudden crisis by which the pope was forced to rescue ancient Rome, by subjecting the city to

20 Rom. 13.3 quoted in Holum, "Inscription in the Imperial Revenue Office."

21 Liebeschuetz, *Decline and Fall*, 104–68.

22 Feissel and Kaygusuz, "Un mandement impérial."

23 Gatier, "Nouvelles inscriptions de Gerasa."

24 Severus of Antioch, *Select Letters*, 1.8, 43.

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the spiritual power. Still less did Gregory's care for Rome reflect a wish to become independent of the empire. It was simply "business as usual" for a bishop in the empire of Justinian and his successors.²⁵

It was with a sense of representing a stable social order, with a long past behind it, that the inhabitants of a "heartland" of Christian kingdoms turned to the outside world.

"Although it may not have a preacher . . . it cannot
 but know of Christ from what it has heard from
 other nations."²⁶

In 578, the monks of a monastery perched in the Pharaonic ruins of Thebes in Upper Egypt wrote up a prayer for the empire sent to them, from Alexandria, by their patriarch, Damianus. They should pray "for the prosperous life of the kings . . . and that every barbarian nation, unto the ends of the earth, may be in subjection under their hands, and that the whole world may become one body."²⁷

It is revealing that the patriarch to whom the monks owed obedience was not even the patriarch recognized by the emperors for whom the monks prayed – Damianus was the miaphysite patriarch of Alexandria. Deemed a "heretic," his patriarchate was, technically, illegal. But the public language he adopted was identical to that of any other bishop within the empire.

It was taken for granted, in official circles, that Christianity would come to the barbarians when God wished it; and that, when it came, it would come through the magnetic attraction of the Christian empire. Often this ideology appeared to come true. Resident in Constantinople, John of Biclaro, a Spanish predecessor of Julian of Toledo, witnessed such ceremonies of integration. In 569, the Garamantes (a tribal confederation on the Saharan frontier of North Africa) "asked through their envoys that they be incorporated into the peace of the Roman state and into the Christian faith."²⁸

So did the Maccuritae, from the Dongola region of the northern Sudan. In 573, their ambassadors arrived. Bringing elephant tusks and a giraffe, "they placed themselves on friendly terms with the Romans."²⁹ The gifts were a reminder that, through the prestige of the Christian empire, the Kingdom

²⁵ Delogu, "Solium imperii-urbs ecclesiae."
²⁶ Julian of Toledo, *De comprobatione sextae aetatis*, 1.14, 161.
²⁷ Crum and Evelyn-White, *Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes* 2, 148–52.
²⁸ John of Biclaro, *Chronicon*, ch. 7, 63.
²⁹ Ibid., 9, 64; 28, 67.

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of Christ had become known far south of the rainless zone of Egypt, in the savannah lands that edged the northern tip of Equatorial Africa. Even there, empire left its mark. The churches of Dongola are faithful copies of Byzantine models. As late as the eleventh century, the tomb inscriptions of the region used Constantinopolitan Greek prayers for the passing of the soul.³⁰

What this “ideology of attraction” failed to recognize was that, by the year 600, Christianity had spread, in less formal ways, less easily condensed into the triumphant “sound bites” of contemporary narratives. The heartlands of Christianity were already ringed by an extensive “penumbra.” In the words of Julian of Toledo, no “preacher” had come to many nations: that is, no “preacher” such as would have been recognized in official circles – no royal or imperial embassy had reached them; no bishop and clergy commissioned for the purpose had set up churches among them. Nonetheless, Christ was known to them, “from what it has heard from other nations.”³¹

The ideology of the Christian heartlands tended to censor this slow trickle of knowledge of Christianity into Asia, Africa, and northern Europe. The “Kingdom of Christ” might be universal, but it only worked through clearly visible representatives: through a clergy supported, to varying degrees, by the prestige of a Christian state. What this view failed to recognize was that, for outsiders accustomed to a diversity of spiritual powers, sixth-century Christianity, in and of itself, was an exciting source of potential blessing and protection. Its symbols and rituals were known to be powerful. They were frequently grafted on to other systems.

Religious *bricolage* of this kind occurred all over Europe and Asia. The Cross appears frequently on ceramics in Iraq and even on coins in Sasanian Merv.³² In 591, even a party of Turks from Kirghizstan, on the frontier of China, appeared in Constantinople with the Sign of the Cross on their foreheads: “They declared that they had been assigned this by their mothers: for when a fierce plague was endemic among them, some Christians advised them that the foreheads of their young should be marked with this sign.”³³

It was the same in Saharan Africa. The spread of knowledge of Christianity, and the adoption of selected elements of its rituals, cannot be reduced to the few moments of contact between the imperial authorities and the Berber and Tuareg confederacies which stretched far to the south of the frontiers of Roman North Africa. In the Tuareg language of the western Sahara, the

30 Godlewski, “New Approach.”

31 Julian of Toledo, *De comprobatione sextae aetatis*, 1.14, 161.

32 Simpson, “Mesopotamia,” 65; Hermann et al., “International Merv Project,” 64.

33 Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 5.10.15, 146–47.