CHAPTER I

Late Antiquity and Islam
Historiography and history

The purpose of this chapter is to set out the overarching historiographic parameters for the discussions to follow, and to draw a line connecting the various component chapters of this book. It aims to discuss salient elements of the scholarly context that led to the framing of the questions asked and for the constitution of the objects of research pursued. This book sustains the simple thesis that Islam emerged in a specific time and place, in the wake of the Byzantine–Sasanian wars and the subsequent breakdown of the southern *limes* of both empires, areas that had for two centuries been particularly susceptible to the resonances of events further north. The time at issue is a period that has come to be known as Late Antiquity, a period whose purchase extended beyond empires and beyond periodisation based upon imperial history alone. The place is at once the central node of the late antique system, the region of the east Mediterranean where late antique empires and imperial cultures flourished, and its extension into one of Late Antiquity's marginal, *ultra-limes* zones, this being the pagan reservation of western Arabia that, with its paganism, represented an older form of continuity with Antiquity.

Neither Islam nor Late Antiquity constitutes by itself a topic of historical investigation. Each will need to have its parameters specified in terms of both time and place, and their various relationships of continuity, disjunction, inflection and refraction need to be deliberately investigated. Both Islam and Late Antiquity are macro-historical categories that require deliberate attention as to their internal constitution and articulations, their temporal termini and their historical-geographical locations.

Scholarship on Late Antiquity has already sought to develop specifications regarding the mutations following Hellenistic and Latin Roman times, reacting to views which tend implicitly to regard this long period of time as either vacuous and inchoate, signalled by a loose use of the term 'transition', or else of the degeneration of classicism. This body of scholarship has also attempted, in a variety of ways, to relate Islam to newer

I

definitions of the late antique period. The scholarly context therefore appears to be promising, and somewhat ripe for a serviceable stock-taking and consideration both synthetic and analytical. This may offer the possibility that Late Antiquity might be used as an explanatory grid that would account for the conditions that made possible the emergence of Islam, an emergence for which a fiercely singular aspect is often claimed.

The setting of Late Antiquity

Two issues arise immediately as one seeks to specify the parameters of both Late Antiquity and Islam, as they must arise in all macro-historical characterisations and denominations: categorisation and periodisation. The former, categorisation, requires considerations of internal morphology. The latter involves investigations of continuities and discontinuities: continuities and discontinuities not of some cultural or other essence constituting the morphology of the category in question, nor of overlying lines of genealogical filiation which are seen to assure continuities of essence. Rather, one would need to look at historical legacies as offering a repertoire of social, political, cultural and other possibilities, which might develop into different permutations and combinations of elements in place. In other words, it will be argued that what was to become Islamic civilisation was in effect the regional civilisation of western Asia: not the cause or consequence of the late antique period, but its most successful crystallisation,[1] with late antique empires providing the conditions for both its emergence and its initial crystallisation. Consequently, emphasis will be laid less on the far-fetched but persistent predisposition to interpret late antique Arabs and their religions in terms of the pre-Hellenistic, the so-called pan-Babylonian and, by extension, allegedly the proto-Semitic condition (in relation to which the contemporary witness of desert Arabs might be seen in terms of degeneration),[2] when not seen entirely in terms of a uniqueness signalled by an exotic religion.

It will be argued in what follows that Islam forms an integral part of Late Antiquity in the sense that it instantiated, under the signature of a new universal calendar, two salient features which overdetermine – rather

---

[1] Morony, *Iraq*, 526.
[2] On which Albright, 'Islam', 284 ff. Pan-Babylonianism was the name given to caricature the very widespread trend to interpret Oriental religions, and monotheistic religions by association, with reference to a primeval originality ascribed to Mesopotamian religion, and is one that will be encountered later. See Rogerson, *Anthropology*, 29 ff., and Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 227 ff., 236 ff.

than constitute the 'essence' of – this period. These are monotheism and œcumenical empire, the conjunction of which, in constituting the history of this period, serves in very complex ways as its points of articulation and internal coherence. Both monotheism (in senses to be discussed in the next chapter) and empire might be termed Roman, or perhaps Late Roman;[3] the relatively sparse reference to the Sasanians in the discussions that follow is due to the simple fact that their legacy made itself felt meaningfully only after the period of concern to us here, and that, unlike Byzantium, the Sasanian empire was more of a tributary state that, albeit defining itself dynastically and politically, did not seem as consistently to consider cultural and religious universalism as constituent elements in its understanding of empire.[4] Both monotheism and empire are taken in a sense that abstains from the altogether common reflex to regard Rome, or any such macro-historical category, as simply a figure of continuity with a classical past, or, in a wistful, stoic or passionate temper, to look at her history as one of decline and degeneration.[5]

It will also be argued that geography is crucial in this respect. Space needs to be weighted by time, in such a way that the spatial boundaries of the historical trajectory under consideration may be seen to dilate, contract or otherwise shift, as historical time works in concrete space. In this way, space will cease to be considered as a mere container and become

---

[3] Bearing in mind that the adjective 'late' is not taken generally to be altogether complimentary (Bowersock, 'Vanishing paradigm', 33), and is used here for the convenience of general chronological indication. The same pejorative connotation applies to the French use of the term 'Bas-Empire' (Marrou, *Saint Augustin*, 664).

[4] Cf. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 33, but see Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 232–7, which might be seen to be an exaggeration if one noted Sasanian respect for local religions (Flusin, *Anastase*, 232–3, for Caesarea). Nevertheless, a schematic but not unconvincing case has been made for seventeen points of parallelism between the two empires: Morony, 'Should Sasanian Iran'. Recent research has suggested forcefully that the Sasanian empire should rather be regarded as a Sasanian–Parthian confederacy with considerable baronial control by the older Parthian nobility over vast territories in the north and north-eastern 'quarters' of Sasanian domains than as a centralised state. Further, moments of central religious control from the centre were evanescent, and the common model of a state-patronised and state-supported orthodoxy overseen by the Magi is compromised by the religious heterogeneity of Sasanian domains and the changing imperial tastes in matters of religion: Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, chs. 2 and 5, *passim*.

[5] Cameron ('Absence,' 26, 29 f.) has highlighted with exceptional clarity the institutional academic reticence, sensibilities and preferences relating to Late Antiquity: it is used by Roman historians in terms of contrast to what came before, as post-Roman; if used with Constantine as its starting point it speaks well to Orthodox and eastern agendas; it begs the question of Roman historians as to whether Justinian was Roman or Byzantine; if extended into the eighth century or later, it may cause itself to be avoided 'because what comes later is Byzantium'. In all, choosing Late Antiquity over early Byzantium lays claim to both chronological and geographical space, as the period is, geographically, 'probably' Near Eastern or east Mediterranean, with the idea that the Arab conquests constituted a caesura now increasingly under the pressure of archaeological evidence to the contrary.

relational, as historical space. Thus, in speaking of late Romanity, stock needs to be taken of the fact that its institutions, broadly considered, and their spatial distribution, along with their centres (the capital, the imperial residences,[6] the sources of wealth and of cultural production, relevant population groups), were in a very real sense translated spatially as its centre of gravity shifted, thus involving the translocation, over time, of a historical category. One is thereby able to give determinate sense to the incongruity of regarding, for example, Greece as part of the Occident, and Morocco as part of the Orient.[7]

For indeed, it is the case that geographical metaphors of East and West, directly or indirectly, have played an oddly determinant role in the delimitations of Antiquity and Late Antiquity. These, bearers of mutual 'otherness', bear within themselves connotations that impede rather than aid the understanding, and famously muddy attempts at understanding Byzantium,[8] let alone Islam. It will be seen in what follows that Islam is the end product of the translation of Romanity to the East, considered quite simply as a cardinal point unburdened of culturalist connotations, and that it is within the structures of Romanity that Islam, as it eventually evolved by a process described in this book, found its conditions of possibility: œcumenical empire with the salvific vocation of a monotheist religion, the two articulated symbolically by political theology and a theology of history. The system was underwritten by an œcumenical currency and urbanism, the whole package now expressed under a new signature and in a different language. In all, it will be suggested that Late Antiquity might benefit from considerations that would reinstate its Romanity, considered as a comprehensive imperial system,[9] as this would restrain the culturalist, classicist interpretative drift written into the 'antiquity' component of this general title.

To this historical trajectory, and in the terms suggested, categories of Orient and Occident, of Europe and Asia, will be seen to matter little. The overall thrust of these classificatory categories seems generally to be of

[6] It is notable that only one emperor resided in Rome after AD 300 – Maxentius, from 306 to 312 (Mitchell, *Later Roman Empire*, 309).

[7] One may note a rather distorted perspective on the internal economy of spatial relations, including centrality, from modern cartography based on the projection of Mercator and its later developments: Hodgson, *Venture*, 1.55 f.

[8] McCormick, 'Byzantium', 2.

[9] There is much work on empires. It will suffice here to recall a number of salient features of such durable, large-scale political systems: limited differentiation of political goals across large territories, the relative autonomy of goals centrally set, control and deployment of free-floating resources, a dialectic of social and cultural congruence and incongruence across space, elite circulation over time, and administrative institutionalisation. See Eisenstadt, *Political Systems*, ch. 1 and *passim*.

figuring homeostatic continuities within, and disjunctive relations with-out. One might add that the frontiers and cardinal locations of Barbarians shifted over time. Nevertheless, Europe is generally used as a rhetorical figure, a historical synecdoche in which part and whole stand for one another, despite shifts which overcame territories involved in myriad oppo-sitions between ethnic denominations that changed over time.[10] It may well be remembered that Europe was a term originally used for navigational ori-entation in the Aegean, and did not correspond to the east/west division arising from political conflicts,[11] nor to their use by the Roman imperial state as administrative terms.[12]

Mutation, decadence and religion

Delivering his inaugural lecture at Strasburg in 1862, Fustel de Coulanges reproved the habit of classical scholarship of talking of ancient Greeks and Romans as if they were contemporary Englishmen and Frenchmen.[13] It was indeed in terms of diminishing mimetic ability and decreasing 'quant[a] of antiquity',[14] understood as cultural goods, that, like much else, the history of what would now be termed late antique art – including Byzantine – was conceived. These were quanta remaindered in a process of decline, with some anticipations of medieval art, and in both cases bereft of inner structure.[15] It was in fact in the context of fin-de-siècle Austrian art history that the first attempts were made to disengage, by formal and stylistic analyses, specific features that characterised an art then called late Roman, *spätrömisch* and *spätantik*, without presuming decadence of decay or a standard ahistorical canon of beauty.[16] Late Antiquity as a historical period

---

[10] Burke, 'Did Europe exist', 22 ff.; Fischer, *Oriens–Occidens*, 26 ff. Similar shifts can be seen in Eran/Aneran (on which now Fowden, *Before and after Muhammad*, 2.11 ff.) and Dār al-Islām/Dār al-Ḥarb.

[11] Hay, *Europe*, 2 ff. It might be added that Aristotle (*Politics*, 1327b) thought of the Greeks not as Europeans, but as having occupied a median position between Europe and Asia.

[12] Fischer, *Oriens–Occidens*, 12, 23.   [13] Fustel de Coulanges, 'Ethos', 183, 187.

[14] Kazhdan and Cutler, 'Continuity', 455.

[15] Kazhdan and Cutler, 'Continuity', 432 f.; Elsner, 'Late antique art', 275.

[16] Demandt, *Fall Roms*, 170 ff.; Elsner, 'Late antique art', 276 f.; Hübinger, *Spätantike*, 22. It is Alois Riegl who is generally credited with this shift, introducing a formalistic vocabulary still current in art history: symmetry, frontality, rigidity, opticality, symbolism, and non-representational perspectives anticipating expressionism. In this sense he discovered Late Antiquity, without using the term consistently or terminologically (Fowden, *Before and after Muhammad*, 2.13, 14). At the same time, Josef Strzygowski worked more comprehensively towards decentring the classicising aesthetic presumptions in the study of late antique art, although this very wide-ranging work on late antique art was cast in the mode of degeneration and decline. It was he who coined the term late antique art in a work published in 1901 under the title *Orient oder Rom? Beiträge zur Geschichte der spätantiken*

and as understood today is, in its turn, the product of the latter part of the century recently past,[17] and is largely but not exclusively the product of what has been criticised as anglocentric scholarship.[18]

Reconsidering the question of decadence and decline was a primary signature of the emergent field of study termed Late Antiquity,[19] now duly become an academic institution, albeit not yet a clear concept, as we shall see. There are evident problems with the classicising notion of history with which ideas of decline and decadence are correlative. It tends to vacate a long historical period of determinate content. In addition, there are conceptual problems relating to a romantic historiographic trope grounded in metaphorical thinking both organismic (with emphasis on classical robustness and integrity) and aesthetic (with emphasis on transhistorical value), tending to take metaphorical terms for actual historical processes.[20]

Closely connected with this last point is the view that, to cast change and transformation primarily – and on occasion exclusively – in terms of debasement and adulteration implies the tendency to apprehend the period designated as decadent by measurement against a classical norm rather than in terms of a historical dynamic which might comprehend both. Pertinent examples are some older studies of Augustine, whose verbal artistry[21] was adjudged baroque and ornamental, devoid of classical solidity. Notions

---

und frühchristlichen Kunst; but his reputation suffered much from his pan-Germanic sympathies: Elsner, 'Birth', 358 ff. 363, 370 f.; Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 387, 401, 403 ff.; Liebeschuetz, 'Birth', 255.

[17] The first use of the term following its art-historical use is generally attributed to Gelzer's 'Altertumswissenschaft', published in 1927. Lietzmann ('Spätantike', *passim*) also used the term in the same year, and, though conceding the aptness of Riegl's art-historical analyses in detail, believed that he had missed the general picture of Orientalisation and decline. In this sense, the concept can comprehend Islamic art as well as Islam as a phenomenon highlighting the answer of the East to Hellenism. Something analogous and *avant la lettre* was already noted by Becker with regard to Spengler ('Spenglers', 266 f.), despite his judgement that Spengler was a 'Procrustes of history'. Finally, Marrou attributes the term to Reitzenstein, without giving a reference (I have not been able to locate the item quoted), and notes that Burckhardt had used the term in a purely chronological sense: Liebeschuetz, 'Birth', 258 n. 46, and 259 for a glimpse at German *Altertumswissenschaft* in relation to this). The first appearances of the term in English seem to date from 1945 and 1962 (James, 'Rise', 21).

[18] Giardina, 'Esplosione', 167 n. 35. On the scholarship leading up to the making of Late Antiquity, see especially Vessey, 'Demise', Cameron, 'A. H. M. Jones', and the statements of the master practitioner and his colleagues in Brown *et al.*, 'World of Late Antiquity'. This point has been clearly and explicitly picked up by critics of Late Antiquity scholarship: Liebeschuetz, 'Late antiquity', 7 f. and *passim*.

[19] See Demandt, *Fall Roms*, the theme being all the rage today (Ward-Perkins, 'Decline'). On the scholarship of the decline of Antiquity and its antecedents, Momigliano, 'Introduction', 2 ff.; on the 'dogged guerrilla warfare' against the melodramatic accounts of classical decline in the academe, see Brown, 'World of late antiquity', 11, and cf. Liebeschuetz, 'Birth', 258 f.

[20] Koselleck, *Niedergang*, 220 ff.; Starn, 'Historical decline', 8; al-Azmeh, *Times of History*, 5 ff.

[21] Marrou, *Saint Augustin*, 663 f., 665, 670 ff.

of cultural degeneration also fall captive to a historiography of names that come to imply morphological stereotypes. Writing a history of names taken for cultural labels, to which characteristics are predicated, deploys a 'hyper-referential' concept of culture not only as a descriptive notion but as an explanatory grid; in this, time and place stand simply as markers, rather than elements of explanation.[22] This is not an unusual procedure; it uses one or more foregrounded elements, often arbitrarily selected and described, as criteria for both the description and the explanation of a historical category,[23] thus vitiating the possibility of addressing the complexity of large-scale historical categories.[24] Ultimately and inevitably, this leads to conceiving historical change in terms of contamination, denaturation, miscegenation, and other conceptual implications of the organismic metaphor.[25]

Questioning the notion of decline and decadence in discussions of Late Antiquity[26] yields considerations of a specific gravity and the particular historical lineaments of this period. These are what are primarily at issue here, notwithstanding the postmodernist temper which has been ascribed to late antique studies by both practitioners and critics.[27] Apart from this sunny, and sometimes maudlin postmodernist temper and the drifts associated with it normally, it is crucial to signal the two central consequences of ascribing to Late Antiquity a proper constitution in historical terms other

[22] Cf. Heuß, 'Antike', 29, 33 f.   [23] Kuper, *Culture*, x–xi and *passim*; Mauss, 'Civilisations', 91 ff.

[24] Crisply described by Tainter (*Collapse of Complex Societies*, 41 and *passim*), who also proposes a way of looking at decline in terms of the marginal returns of systemic complexity (193 ff.). Cf. Mauss' characterisation of a civilisation as a 'hyper-social system of social systems' ('Civilisation', 89).

[25] Marrou (*Saint Augustin*, 690, 690–1 n. 3) described Spengler's 'pseudomorphs' as 'Gauche'. See Spengler, *Decline*, 2.189. Note that this same procedure prescribes criteria of relevance and irrelevance for the inclusion and exclusion of historical materials in scholarship. One might mention, quite at random, materials that help the understanding of the 'Greek miracle' in terms of commonalities with the broader Near East: Burkert, *Revolution*, 1 ff. and *passim*, and Astour, 'Greek names', 195.

[26] Bowersock, 'Vanishing paradigm', 33 ff., 42; Cameron, '"Long" late antiquity', 173.

[27] Practitioners (Cameron, '"Long" late antiquity') have invoked Edward Said and the 'strategies and techniques' of post-colonial studies, including multiculturalism, as well as postmodernist relativism and due recognition of 'the periphery' (Bowersock, 'Vanishing paradigm', 39 and 'Centrifugal forces', 20). For his part, Brown (*World*, 184, 86 ff., 103 ff., 109) characterised the 'greatest political achievement' of Late Antiquity as the transformation of 'the average provincial' into a 'citizen' of the empire, and saw the period as one which somehow empowered the demos by its adoption of a middlebrow culture, and indeed of a 'Cockney culture', encapsulated in the Holy Man; he regarded monasticism as the bridgehead which brought fringes of Antiquity (Syria and Egypt) into the culture and politics of the empire: cf. Vessey, 'Demise', 395 ff. and Ruggini, 'All'ombra'. These views have certain concordances with Momigliano, 'Introduction', 9, 11 ff., 15. Critics have made the point that these views are expressed in clichés (Athanassiadi, 'Antiquité tardive', 313 ff.; Liebeschuetz, 'Late antiquity', 6, 8), and have in their turn been accused of 'transparent nostalgia for the ideological historiography of an earlier era' (Bowersock, 'Centrifugal forces', 19). Indeed, one critic of Late Antiquity studies regrets the restraint of professional, disciplinary turf divisions occasioned by the inclusivist attitudes of Late Antiquity scholarship (Giardina, 'Esplosione', 164).

than those of degeneration. The one is precisely the move to what had long
been taken for the 'periphery',[28] understood here not so much as a post-
modernist or sub-alternist evocation of marginality, but as a re-conception
and reclamation of what was historically central. This was characterised
above as the geographical weighting of temporality – with emphasis on
both transformation and relocation, as well as on the spatial specifica-
tion of issues discussed. Broad historiographic strokes apart, such claims
for atrophy and the disappearance of ancient learning are counter-factual:
Late Antiquity, including Romanity, was not exclusively Graecophone, and
recent work has shown very clearly and amply how ancient learning flour-
ished energetically with high technical accomplishment in the medium of
Syriac.[29] This was a full dress rehearsal of the much better known story
of later Arabic learning, both representing full continuity with secular late
antique learning, in different linguistic registers existing in territories largely
overlapping with those of Late Antiquity. Clearly, a shift in perspective is
in order.

The other is the revaluation of religion, the reassessment of the period
in some general way as the Theopolis, to use Marrou's somewhat hyper-
bolic term, with an accent on culture, specifically religious culture,[30] one,
moreover, not confined to Christianity, but pre-dating it in late Roman
paganism.[31] It will be noted that in this revaluation of religion a novel
positive spin is put on one aspect of history that Gibbon, like later authors,
declared to be retrograde and irrational,[32] and that had been one of the
views of the late antique period that prompted the scholarship under dis-
cussion here.[33] This strong emphasis on matters religious in late antique
studies has been criticised for taking place at the expense of politics and

---

[28] Bowersock, 'Dissolution', 165 ff., 170 ff. The claim that contemporary Late Antiquity studies are,
in addition, born of underlying concerns with European integration (James, 'Rise', 28 f.) is relevant
to this argument.

[29] Tannous, *Syria*, 25 ff. and chs. 2 and 3, *passim*.

[30] Marrou, *Saint Augustin*, 694 ff., who, though deploring the possible interpretation of 'civilisation'
as an equivalent to the German 'Kultur' and its dreaded connotations, nevertheless identifies the
two conceptually, albeit implicitly: Vessey, 'Demise', 385.

[31] See Marrou, *Décadence romaine*, 42 ff.

[32] Cf. Liebeschuetz, 'Late antiquity', 3, 3 n. 10, who detects in this an affinity to postmodernism, and
Ward-Perkins, *Fall of Rome*, 172. This point is recognised by Bowersock ('Vanishing paradigm',
43), and cf. Vessey, 'Demise', 392, who speaks of using Gibbon's tools without his prejudices.
Of these 'prejudices', it is worth noting that, like many of his contemporaries, Gibbon offered a
positive evaluation of Muḥammad and his religion – thought to be a humanist religion without
much superstition or a clerisy – as a foil to Christianity and its church (Lewis, 'Gibbon', 98 f. and
passim).

[33] Cf. Cameron, 'Redrawing the map', 266 ff. and Dodds, *Greeks*, 193, 253

institutions,[34] as a result of which Late Antiquity historians have 'taken over' the early history of Christianity from theologians and Patristic scholars.[35]

Needless to say, this emphasis on a religion that not only was to become 'theopolitical', but also was profoundly internalised in the spirits and lives of ordinary people, with emphasis on self-grooming, on the creation of 'textual communities', indeed producing for one scholar a 'new axial age'.[36] Such a perspective encourages the possibility for the relative effacement of social history as its historical dynamics are reconfigured around religious developments, implicitly taken to constitute the new cultural signature of the period. Culture and society might thereby be brought together in such a way 'as to leave scarcely any daylight between them', both being regarded as aspects of religion.[37] This lack of distinction is generally characteristic of studies of Muslim history, conceptually homologous to classicising studies of cultures (the Greek, the Roman, the Arab, the Muslim), and inextricably connected to romantic and organismic views of history.[38]

But such theocentric enthusiasm need not necessarily be made central, nor was it entirely an invention of what has come to be Late Antiquity, not least in its Christian or Christianising redactions. Scholars of Late Antiquity realise that religion, and 'ferocious self-grooming', were not confined to Christianity, but had also marked aspects of Late Roman paganism.[39] The growing salience of religion, in other words, needs to be regarded as the distinguishing feature of the later Roman empire, a state of 'extraordinary tenacity'.[40]

If we consider Late Antiquity as a period when 'ancient traditions were being decanted',[41] and if we were to read through this metaphor, charming or grim according to one's reading of it, then we shall be impelled to inquire into the end product of this process of decantation and its resulting consistency. We shall also need to look into how the later purchase of such

---

[34] Giardina, 'Esplosione', 164 and *passim*; Athanassiadi, 'Antiquité tardive', 319 ff., who also (313), like other critics, comments on the seductiveness of Peter Brown's style. The revaluation of religion is of course common today, and the mellifluous fascination with rustic superstition, and with the irrational generally, is part of the package.

[35] Cameron, 'Long late antiquity', 180 f., with a positive attitude. It is little wonder that Late Antiquity has found favour among many Byzantinists (see *ibid.*, 175).

[36] Stroumsa, *Sacrifice*, 24 ff., 29, 150 ff., 182.

[37] Vessey, 'Demise', 394, with reference to Peter Brown. Cameron (*Mediterranean*, 69 ff., 75) has warned in detail against simply regarding Late Antiquity as an 'age of spirituality'.

[38] Al-Azmeh, *Times of History*, 202 ff., 225 ff.

[39] For instance, Cameron, 'Redrawing the map', 266 ff.

[40] Cameron, *Mediterranean*, 197 ff. Mitchell (*Later Roman Empire*, 380) has shown how, despite debilitating wars and an extraordinary series of natural catastrophes, the imperial administration continued to function impressively through the second half of the sixth century.

[41] Le Goff, *Purgatory*, 12.

residues as remained were sedimented, bearing in mind all the while that, in matters historical, the consequential application, without residue, of general categories of nomenclature and associated description is as facile as the deployment stereotypes. The ease with which 'ideal types' become stereotypes is well known.

Yet late antique scholarship has little explicit truck with this stereotypical patterning of the historical understanding, it being generally given to a certain descriptivism, sometimes of thick description. Yet its concern with religion as a structuring element during the period, in less subtle hands, could be seen as implicitly reinstating a substantivist element in its construction of a historical category. It is little wonder that Late Antiquity has been described as an elliptical formula artificially confected to mark a historical period requiring the filling of a chronological deficit.[42]

Scholarship on Late Antiquity repudiates an understanding of the period as being merely transitional. Yet it remains in many important ways captive to its polemical beginnings, and uses as a defensive strategy, often obliquely, the notion of transition, yielding an understanding dependent for its constitution upon earlier classicism, 'antiquity',[43] the primary element qualified by lateness.[44] When unreflected, this notion remains captive to a literary and cultural understanding of antiquity of venerable scholarly vintage. Marrou noted this possible problem, but proposed that the solution needed to be normative, suggesting simply that a positive connotation of the term 'late' should be adopted and that this 'other antiquity' should, when regarded on its own, be characterised as a 'mutation'.[45] Late Antiquity, a period of metamorphosis, is in this perspective still antique, but 'irreducible' to Antiquity.[46] In other words, the situation does not appear to be substantively different from that prevailing in 1927 when Gelzer first put the term *Spätantike* into circulation, lamenting the fact that it was regarded merely as the end of Antiquity or the beginning of the Middle Ages.[47]

So what is it precisely that was the subject of change and mutation, and what was it that might be considered to have constituted the *differentia* of Late Antiquity, thereby coming to constitute this period as an intelligible historical unit, apart from signalling the recognition of change unrelated

---

[42] Athanassiadi, 'Antiquité tardive', 311, 314.
[43] This point is well brought out by Martin, 'Qu'est-ce que l'antiquité "tardive"?', 263 ff. See Clover and Humphreys, 'Towards a definition', in *Tradition* 3. In practical terms, one sees this indeterminacy institutionally translated into philological and epigraphic projects concerning late antique topics carried out in the usual manner of classical studies (Solignac, 'Rencontre').
[44] Cf. Heuβ, 'Antike', 27.   [45] Marrou, *Décadence romaine*, 12 f.
[46] Martin, 'Qu'est-ce que l'antiquité "tardive"?', 265.   [47] Gelzer, 'Altertumswissenschaft', 173.