I

Christianizing Knowledge, or a Beginning of Late Antiquity

[N]ew readers of course make new texts, and their new meanings are a function of their new forms.¹

E. A. Judge told his mentor A. H. M. Jones that he intended to “find out what difference it made to Rome to have been converted.” Jones had asked the question before, and devised a succinct response: “none.”² His answer has not proved persuasive, and the question has occupied historians for as long as critical history has been written. Judge offered a teleological and triumphalist vision of late ancient Christianity that embraces dialectics in service of a higher, “Western” ideal,³ while others, such as Brown,⁴ Matthews,⁵ Von Haehling,⁶ MacMullen,⁷ Van Dam,⁸ Trombley,⁹ Salzman,¹⁰

¹ McKenzie, Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts, 29.
³ Ibid., 19.
⁵ Matthews, Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A.D. 364–425.
⁷ MacMullen, Christianizing the Roman Empire: A.D. 100–400.
⁸ Van Dam, “From Paganism to Christianity at Late Antique Gaza.”
¹⁰ Salzman, “How the West Was Won: The Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy in the West in the Years after Constantine”; Salzman, The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire.
Barnes,¹¹ and Brenk¹² have queried shifting social mores, the conversion of temples to churches, and Sunday morning head-counts in order to index the impact of Christianity on a baseline “pagan” culture,¹³ to which Alan Cameron offered the important corrective that the “battle” between Christians and the last pagans of Rome was one-sided, at best: “While late antique Christians certainly saw themselves as engaged in a battle with paganism, what is much less clear is whether pagans saw themselves fighting a battle against Christianity.”¹⁴

Often, modern scholars have mirrored skeptical ancient counterparts in their approach to understanding the spread of Christianity through the ranks of Rome’s elite. Augustine reports a conversation between Simplician, bishop of Milan, and the renowned Neoplatonic philosopher Marius Victorinus. The philosopher would often say to the churchman, “You know that I am already a Christian,” and the bishop would reply, “I won’t believe or count you among the Christians until I see you in a church of Christ.”¹⁵ The philosopher offered a sarcastic response, using the Socratic method to point out the absurdity of Simplician’s assertion. *Ergo parietes faciunt Christianos?* “Oh, is it walls that create Christians?” For many scholars aiming to understand Christianity in the later Roman empire, the answer to Victorinus’s jest is “yes.”

¹¹ Barnes, “Statistics and the Conversion of the Roman Aristocracy.”
¹³ “Christianization” as an object of study has its detractors, as well. David Hunt, for instance:

> Papers and books about Christianising the Roman Empire ought not to be encouraged. The concept is certainly a snare, and very probably a delusion as well. It is so big an aspect of Late Antiquity as to be all but beyond the control of the historian, and admits of so many layers of meaning and varieties of interpretation that it is in danger of becoming meaningless.

Hunt, “Christianising the Roman Empire: The Evidence of the Code,” 143. Robin Whelan is among the few contemporary scholars approaching the question of Christianization beyond simple allegiance. See especially a recent *Journal of Roman Studies* article which “considers how the Christian identity of imperial officials manifested itself when the Theodosian dynasty ruled the Roman Empire in both East and West.” Whelan, “Mirrors for Bureaucrats: Expectations of Christian Officials in the Theodosian Empire,” 76. See also Edward Watts’s chapter in *Late Ancient Knowing*, which considers the intellectual history of the process by which a Christian empire could be envisioned, on the premise that “Christianization needed to be imagined before it could be implemented.” Watts, “Christianization,” 197.

¹⁴ Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, 10.
¹⁵ *Confessions* 8.2.(4) Text LCL 26. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
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Here I return to the question of Christianization, asking again, “what effect did Christianity have on inhabitants of the Roman empire in the fourth and fifth centuries?” I want to know what difference Christianity made. My method, however, diverges from the classic treatments. Rather than asking after numbers of Christians or moral renewal in late ancient Rome, I investigate the methods by which a meaningful truth claim could be made at a particular moment: during the period of flux when Christians first came to overtake state institutions with sufficient influence to effect a dramatic change on the structure of meaning-making in the Roman empire. My goal is to trace shifting practices of knowledge production in the fourth and fifth centuries, paying particular attention to scholastic sources in the domains of theology, historiography, and law.

This is to make a rather simple claim, but perhaps one with significant implications. There is no “rise of Christianity” beyond the “rise” – increase in social standing and influence – of large numbers of individual Christians. I argue that investigating a shift in the way that individual, influential Christians make arguments can offer insight into the rise of Christianity generally because during the years of the Theodosian dynasty the methods of these individual, influential Christians were taken up across scholarly disciplines by Christians and non-Christians alike, and far beyond the realm of theology.

This is a study of what counts as a fact. In trying to understand what counts as a fact, I have done what countless sociologists and historians of science did before me: go to the laboratory where facts are produced and pay close attention to their conjuring. What I’ve found is similar to what historians of science have remarked since the early days of that discipline, namely that “scientific fact is the product of average, ordinary people and settings, linked to one another by no special norms of communication forms, who work with inscription devices” in the form of “writing, schooling, printing, [and] recording procedures.” “The mysterious thinking process that seemed to float like an inaccessible ghost over social studies of science,” Latour writes, “at last has flesh and bones and can be thoroughly examined. The mistake before was to oppose heavy matter . . . to spiritual, cognitive thinking processes instead of focusing on the most ubiquitous and lightest of all materials: the written one.”

In his study of Pasteur’s work on a bovine anthrax vaccine, Latour insists that the scientist’s laboratory is a political space – political in so far

16 Latour, “Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise the World,” 162.
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as laboratory results powerfully and fundamentally changed the society into which they were unleashed. But the nature of that change is twofold, and does not consist solely in the solution to a veterinary problem. First, verification of the effect of Pasteur’s vaccine required new forms of data to be collected on a national scale and in a novel manner. Knowing whether the vaccine was effective required the expansion of statistical and quantitative methods devised in and for laboratory science to the whole of nineteenth-century French society. Second, the acceptance of such facts, and the economic benefits that compound therefrom, require a lay public to accept a new way of making arguments, presented in forms and formats previously confined to the microcosm of the laboratory. In order for a vaccine’s success to become a “fact,” laboratory methods of knowledge creation and verification needed to be governmentally operationalized and then societally accepted. Argumentative forms are notoriously fecund, in this way, escaping from the labs which create them and roaming free through a combination of top-down implementation and bottom-up opportunism.

This book studies another time when a novel form of argumentation escaped from the lab. Rather than a microcosm of the farm recreated in a Petri dish, the laboratory that I engage here attempted to form a true micro-cosmos, distilling grand questions of divine ontology to propositional statements, debating those statements, and determining their proper resolution in nuce – or in Nicaea, as it were. These scientists (or in this case we should call them “theologians,” while keeping in mind that their aims and methods were, in their own estimation, fundamentally empirical) engaged a question of how to define the nature of the deity: what god consisted in, and how the various forms that god takes relate to one another. They created an intellectual lab, overseen by the imperial government and by the deity under discussion, and yet their pronouncements could not be truly universal until and unless their form of knowledge production came to be accepted outside the theological laboratory.

Pasteur had an advantage over the scientists of Nicaea: none of his lab mates came to field trials intent on denigrating the vaccine, as was the case with dueling factions in the wake of Nicaea. Nevertheless, Pasteur’s field trials were not widely acceptable until the physical procedures of the lab were duplicated on a national scale: categorizing outbreaks through microbial sampling, isolating agents in the lab, and registering them on a standardized ledger. The acceptance of a scientific fact required the world to replicate the methods of the lab in its approach to the production of reliable knowledge. Likewise, the acceptance of a set of theological
propositions in the fourth century required both the creation of new procedures for devising reliable theological facts and the widespread acceptance of those argumentative methods.

This book tells a story about the creation and implementation of a new way of making theological arguments in Late Antiquity. The forging of a new form of theological praxis is only half of the story, however. In the years after Nicene Christians came to be a ruling elite for the first time, their way of making arguments, devised in a lab and aimed at answering a particular (however cosmic) problem, became detached from the question posed and roamed free. I argue that early in the fourth century, Christians adjudicating all sides of the “Nicene controversy” forged new tools for argumentation in the fires of doctrinal controversy. While wrestling over the nature of Christ, these clerics created a new scholastic regime: new arguments were made in novel ways. By the late fourth century, when these Christians came into power as a ruling elite, their approach to truth – how it could be accessed and how it should be presented – was fundamentally different from where it began, and was even more at odds with the prevailing epistemic framework of their Roman Traditionalist neighbors. Nicene Christians had invented a new book culture, but that book culture did not long remain unique to Christian scholars. When Nicene Christians came to power as a political ruling class, this peculiarly Christian argumentative structure found its way quickly into the domains of law, history, miscellany, and even Talmud. One answer to the question of “what difference did Christianity make?” is this: Nicene Christians, ascending to positions of power, changed the way that an entire scholastic culture approached the creation, verification, and dissemination of facts.

My study pays close attention to the intellectual culture of the Theodosian Age. Or, to borrow terminology from Roger Chartier’s groundbreaking work, I am interested to describe and explain historical changes in the use of book culture as a tool for making and presenting theological arguments. My argument, it should be made clear, bears no relation to the spate of books and articles over the past decade returning to a Gibbon-esque teleology of Christian decline, decrying the rise of intolerance and violence and the failure of “dialogue” during the years surrounding the Council of Chalcedon in 451 – on which see importantly Goldhill, The End of Dialogue in Antiquity and Athanassiadi, Vers la pensée unique: la montée de l’intolérance dans l’Antiquité tardive. For a strenuous rejoinder to the latter, see Morlet, “L’Antiquité tardive fut-elle une période d’obscurantisme? A propos d’un ouvrage récent.” More nuanced analyses of the issue of dialogue in Late Antiquity can be found in Lim, Public Disputation, Power, and Social Order in Late Antiquity and a useful counterpoint in van Nuffelen, “The End of Open Competition? Religious Disputations in Late Antiquity.”
My conception of intellectual culture is described well by Carlo Ginzburg’s conception of culture itself: “Culture offers to the individual a horizon of latent possibilities – a flexible and invisible cage in which he can exercise his own conditional liberty.” This is the concept of intellectual culture that I invoke here: a cage, or a series of expectations, constructed through generations of precedent. The outline of the cage has an externally coherent logic; it was created in a particular place, with a particular shape, for historically contingent reasons. When later inhabitants forgot why the cage took its shape, the underlying logic moved into the domain of historical knowledge. The cage defines the boundaries of proper knowledge production. It can be flexed and punctured in places but, at least for the extent of the Theodosian Age, it remained identifiably intact.

It is possible to glimpse argumentative expectations in two places. They are visible where scholars explicitly discuss what their work sets out to accomplish, and what constitutes the boundaries of “good” work in their technical domain – a long tradition beginning at least with Aristotle, who urged writers, orators, and even flute players to preface their productions with a short discourse on method. Such moments of self-conscious methodological reflection are rare in ancient scholarship, but they prove illuminating when available and serve as an anchor for my discussion. Latent expectations about the structure of a good argument are visible in another place as well: in the sum total of scholastic production as it looked and was utilized in the Theodosian Age. Even when scholars are not forthcoming with plain declarations of their methodology, we can see their prejudices and intuitions in the products of their scholarship: the form in which they lay out their arguments, the way that they organize their pages, the places to which they send those pages, and the manner in which they read the work of others who they consider to be peers. If intellectual culture is conceived as a “flexible and invisible cage” that “offers to the individual a horizon of latent possibilities,” with this book I aim to describe the history of the cage itself: how it came to have the shape that it does, and how that shape defined the scholarship produced inside it.
In recent decades historians have taken the material form and social function of books as an object of study in and of itself, and as a witness to intellectual history in so far as books are created by people, in time, with purpose. The history of the book can be described as something of a punctuated equilibrium: long stretches of incremental change interrupted by moments of rupture and transition to a new order and a new set of expectations regarding what a book is, how it is to be used, and what potentialities and dangers lie among its leaves. My aim is to describe one such moment of rupture, in which widespread and durable changes in the order of books are visible across seemingly discrete domains of scholarly, technical literature. Material and literary witnesses to the later Roman empire suggest that during the Theodosian Age, scholastic elites developed a distinctly new book culture, one defined by the rise of authorized codes and implicated in the great scholarly productions of the period: the *Theodosian Code*, the golden age of patristic literature, the renaissance of Latin and Greek historiography, and even the *Palestinian Talmud*. Changes visible across the Roman literary landscape of the late fourth century played out throughout the subsequent eighty years, and in turn continue to shape contemporary notions of what books do and what one can do with books. The epistemic primacy of written sources in our contemporary world – the notion of a *constitutional* democracy, for instance – has roots in Rome of the Theodosian Age. In the pages that follow, I endeavor to tell part of that story of transformation.

This book, then, attempts to frame the beginning of Late Antiquity as a moment of rupture not only in politics but in praxis. It describes the transition between a late Roman world in which Christians appear as interlopers and a late ancient world in which the structures and ideologies undergirding an ascendant Christianity appear always already part of the fabric of the Jesus movement. There are other transitions to be described: turning points toward a new trajectory that cannot be linearly assimilated to what came before. My work does not describe the only beginning of Late Antiquity, but it describes an important beginning nevertheless.

My argument proceeds in stages. Chapter 1 reflects on the interconnected social world of elite readers and writers during the Theodosian dynasty, showing how they comprise a single intellectual culture expressed in different disciplinary domains. The core of the argument comprises two parts. Part I (Chapters 2–4) deals with the history of Christian argumentative forms and the creation of novel intellectual tools
in early fourth century, and Part II (Chapters 5–8) considers the proliferation of those tools through diverse domains of scholarship in the late fourth through the middle of the fifth centuries C.E.

Chapter 2 demonstrates the diversity of Christian approaches to truth before the Constantinian Age. I turn to Constantine and Athanasius in Chapter 3, showing the influence of each on a new way of making arguments that became widespread throughout the Orthodox Christian movement during the fourth century. Chapter 4 traces that new, Christian way of making arguments from the realm of theology into “secular” domains during the Theodosian Age, showing how a scholastic method created to solve theological problems came to be used in legal, historical, and scientific texts of the late fourth and fifth centuries.

Chapters 5–8 comprise a second unit which describes the implementation of new argumentative forms by Theodosian Age writers and readers in the ways that they approach books and in the manuscripts that they produced, copied, and used. Chapter 5 focuses on the “rise of the code” and the investiture of the codex format with new meanings when it took center stage as the preferred bookform for scholastic productions. I turn to manuscripts themselves in Chapter 6, showing first the newly instituted scholastic practices that influenced the production and use of books during the fifth century, and then detailing a number of “Christian” scribal tools that were designifed and reused in “secular” manuscripts of the period in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 describes the net effect of scholastic and material changes on the way that Theodosian Age readers approached and interpreted books. A short conclusion offers reflections on the project as a whole and the reverberations that Theodosian Age book culture has had down to our present day, and an Appendix presents a detailed case study on the Theodosian Code, showing how language that was peculiar to Christian theological disputation before the Theodosian Age came to be generalized and ultimately to undergird the great juristic achievement of the fifth century.

OBSERVATIONS ON METHOD

Before discussing the interimplication of scholarly domains in the Theodosian Age, I want to offer some observations on method. First, I have distilled a set of characteristics that I argue in detail are part of a class of analysis: a “new order of books.” This class definition is not exclusive: not every member of the class will possess every characteristic by which the class defined. Put differently: not every attribute of
Theodosian book culture finds expression in every example adduced. My definition of a “new order of books” follows what Ludwig Wittgenstein termed “family resemblances,”22 or what Rodney Needham calls a “polythetic classification.”23 As a result, the sense in which any particular example speaks to a wider book culture is not static. I hope that my reader will consider the strength of my argument overall, and the relationships between part and whole. Second, I ascribe a certain amount of agency to texts themselves—agency that compounds from the actions of writers, readers, scribes, and bookbinders, and the structure of knowledge that each imposes on or reads from the texts that they encounter. It is in this sense that texts can be agents; in their material form texts reflect some intention of their creator, and their form in turn telegraphs to subsequent users a set of argumentative expectations and practices that are related to, but not coterminous with, the intention of the creator.

Consider, for instance, a rock wall intended to delineate a property line. The wall indicates materially an imaginary legal boundary dividing an otherwise contiguous tract of land. A subsequent user of this wall may be a group of children who designate the line of the wall as one terminus in a game of hide-and-seek: in this case the intention of the wall’s creator and the later users’ understanding align to a significant degree. In Latour’s vocabulary, the rock wall in this example is an intermediary: an object that “transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs.”24 Another user of the wall, however, may be a pilot looking to align their plane with the runway ten miles ahead, who knows that the wall happens to sit on the required axis. The old intention of the rock wall remains intact even as a user, the pilot, exploits that structure to new, unforeseen ends. In this scenario the landowner’s agency has found unexpected expression in local flight paths, and that agency is mediated through a rock wall that acts as an agent itself. It is an intermediate agent, but its agency is not passive: it actively orients real-world phenomena. Again in Latour’s framework, in this instance the wall is a mediator: “Their input is never a good predictor of their output; their specificity has to be taken into account every time. Mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry.”25 These are the senses in which

22 Wittgenstein, Philosophische Untersuchungen, paragraph 67.
23 Needham, “Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences.”
25 Ibid.
texts can constitute agents in the world of readers. In cases where an author’s intended use of an argument or work line up, more or less, with the way that scribes and readers actualize the material, manuscripts act as intermediaries. This is not always the case, however, because material texts often – perhaps more often than not – work as mediators instead. As Part II argues in detail, their effect on readers can be the result of authorial intention, clever reuses, or unintended eventualities. The passivity of parchment should not be mistaken for a lack of agency.

Next, a note on the sources upon which my analysis is built. The literature that I engage here is not popular; the majority of it was obscure technical literature in antiquity, and for the most part it remains so today, even among ancient historians. The “new order of books” that I describe, rooted in an argumentative method inflected by the great Christian doctrinal debates of the fourth century, did not extend to the entire population of the Roman empire in the fourth and fifth centuries; perhaps it did not extend in the form that I describe beyond the scholars engaged in intellectual debate under the Theodosian dynasty. A distinction between scholarly productions and those meant for popular consumption is not solely mine, however. This division of literary material between that which is “scholarly” or “elite” and that which is purposefully popular is visible throughout the sources. The Theodosian Code claims explicitly to be intended as a resource for the scholarly efforts “of more industrious people (diligentioribus),” while Ambrose affirmed to his congregation that “the faithful interpreter of the mysteries preaches more through silence” than through divulging to the masses that which is rightly the purview of the scholar. I hope it will become clear over the course of my analysis that the senatorial aristocracy, of which Ambrose and the jurists responsible for the Theodosian Code were part, considered each other to be peers, and intended their work to be engaged and exploited by scholars with like-minded scholastic methods, even when they held divergent substantive commitments.

And finally, a note on “method” itself. It is often observed that historical narratives predicated on case studies and close readings risk mistaking the anecdotal for the universal. At worst such studies exchange the

16 CTb 1.1.5.

Ambrose, Exposition of Psalm 118 4.18. Text PL 15.1247A. See also the same point in 2.12 and 1.2.