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POLIS – IMPERIUM – OIKOUMENĒ: A WORLD RECONFIGURED

Claudia Rapp and H. A. Drake

Classical civilization began for the Greeks with the creation of the *polis*, a unique institution that so completely defined Greek identity that when Aristotle in the fourth century BCE wrote the *Politics*, he began with the observation, "Man is an animal whose natural habitat is the *polis*."[1] "Politics" is one of the many words in our language that derive from this institution, reflecting a way of life that was so thoroughly focused on public participation that someone who concentrated exclusively on business or family concerns was known, literally, as an "idiot" (*idiotēs*). But our word "politics" shows how treacherously misleading the practice of borrowing words from another culture can be. For in our usage, "politics" is strictly a secular activity, one to be contrasted with "religion" or "piety"; this was never the case for the ancient *polis*, which, as Fustel de Coulanges observed a century and a half ago, had its origin in the religious rituals of the Greek family.[2] The ancient version of our notion of a "social contract" was the "covenant," a pact between humans and divinity. This notion we associate with Judeo-Christian thought, but it is one that is equally at home in ancient Greek thinking about the state.

The ancient *polis* on the Greek model was more than just a large settlement of people. It was an economic hub, a concentration of religious sites, a stage for

[1] ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον, *Pol.* 1253a. The sentence is usually translated as "Man is a political animal."

[2] Fustel de Coulanges (2010).

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culture and entertainments, the focal point of the convergence of people and goods from its hinterland, and an administrative center, often governed by the self-rule of its citizens, led by their elected magistrates.[3] It was characterized by great political autonomy: it conducted its own foreign relations, created its own laws, minted its own coins, and employed its own dating system. It was thus also the context in which people's legal status was defined and where they discharged their civic duties. "Political" thought that tied civic identity to the model of the *polis* dominated the Mediterranean for a thousand years, enduring through the creation of territorial states by Alexander the Great and his successors, the foundation of the Roman Republic, and its eventual transformation into the geographic expanse of the Roman Empire.

At the end of antiquity, a great shift in political thought occurred when membership in a world state, an *oikoumenē*, replaced the *polis* as the conceptual framework in which the ancient Mediterranean peoples thought about their relationship to each other. This reorientation was no simple swap of one term for another; it involved a sea change in everything from personal identity to the relative value assigned to families, cities, and regions.

The aim of this book is to explore and untangle the complicated ways in which this change took place. For this purpose, it is best to leave the term *polis* untranslated. This caveat is more than an academic quibble. In many ways "city" is an analogue to *polis* in our language, but since modern cities are not sovereign, the term "city-state" is perhaps a more appropriate analogue. But this term, too, can be misleading as it conjures up medieval and early modern city-states, such as Genoa or Florence in Italy. These were indeed sovereign, but they were also completely secular, and the phrase thus encourages us to project this same orientation onto the "city-states" of antiquity.

The medieval *oikoumenē* that replaced the *polis*, by contrast, was not just a universal state but also one that specified religion as the basis for membership. It was a Christian *oikoumenē* that subordinated all previous forms of civic identity to the overarching criterion of membership in a single, Christian polity. This expansion of the framework of reference is beautifully encapsulated by Eusebius of Caesarea in his fourth-century *Life of Constantine*.[4] Immediately preceding his description of Constantine's famous and fateful vision in the sky, Eusebius describes the gradual opening of his hero's geographic horizons in the context of his conquests: after Constantine was made by God the "universal ruler and governor," he first dealt with the part of the empire he had inherited from his father, and after bringing order and peace to those regions, "he turned his attention to the other parts of the inhabited world [*tēs oikoumenēs*]

[3] Freeman (1950) is a standard work. More recently, see Thomas and Conant (1999); Hansen (2006).

[4] *De Vita Constantini* (*VC*), ed. Winkelmann (1975).

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… so that he might bring healing where help was needed."[5] After simply expanding his radius of activities in his father's footsteps, Constantine then made a conceptual leap, which allowed him, in the words of his admiring biographer, to grow into his true stature: "When he then perceived that the whole earthly element was like a great body" and that the head of that body, Rome, was oppressed by a tyrant, he felt compelled to take action.[6] Constantine's victory against the pagan Maxentius is here cast not merely as an epic triumph of Christianity but also as an event on a global scale.

As Eusebius tells the story, by transforming himself into the First Christian Emperor, Constantine also transformed his world from a Roman to a Christian identity. For most of the modern era, scholars have assigned a negative value to this transformation, seeing it as one of a series of blows that ended classical civilization. The rise of Christianity has been paired with the fall of Rome (whether defined as city, empire, or imperial authority in the West), the establishment of Germanic kingdoms in western Europe, and the advent of Islam, resulting in a grand narrative of an idealized humane and rational ancient world brought to a close by the rise – in Edward Gibbon's definitive formulation in the closing decades of the eighteenth century – of "barbarism and religion."[7]

The developments on which Gibbon's conclusion was based are easily traced in our written sources, whose prejudices we must be wary of repeating. Gibbon's premise of a rational world populated with proto-*philosophes* on the model of his Enlightenment contemporaries that was displaced by this cruel descent into barbarism and religion has been challenged by a substantial amount of research in the past fifty years, during which late antique studies has grown into full maturity. One of the primary developments of this field has been to define late antiquity as a transitional period that must be understood on its own terms – a period of change that was neither a "decline" from a previous standard of excellence nor a harbinger of even worse times in the "dark" Middle Ages.[8] This emphasis on continuities has had its critics, who claim that it comes at the cost of minimizing the severe disruptions that occurred during these centuries.[9] But one result that has gone unchallenged is renewed interest in the religious underpinnings of classical civilization and, with it, the recognition that if we carelessly transfer our modern and limited definition of "political" life to the ancient state, we run the risk of completely misunderstanding

[5] Eus., *VC* I.24–5, trans. Cameron and Hall (1999): 79.
[6] *VC* 1.26, trans. Cameron and Hall (1999): 79.
[7] Gibbon (1909–14), 7:320.
[8] Brown (1971) remains an important point of entry for understanding this period. Of a host of more recent works, see Callu (2006); James (2008); Clark (2011); and the essays in Swain and Edwards (2004).
[9] Most vociferously in Liebeschuetz (2001a, 2001b). See also the essays in Drinkwater and Salway (2007).

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the causes and significance of the changes that occurred during late antiquity. The most important marker of that evolution for the western empire was Augustine's *City of God*, the product of a rethinking of the Christian's role in the empire that was prompted by the Visigothic sack of Rome in 410 CE. Although Clifford Ando's Postscript to this volume calls attention to the evolution of Augustine's thinking about the Roman *civitas*, we have deliberately avoided further exploration of the precipitous military and political decline that occurred in the western empire during the fifth century – not because it is unimportant but because it has been so thoroughly explored in a number of recent works.[10]

Instead, this volume suggests that one of the touchstones for the tectonic shifts that mark the transition from the ancient to the medieval world during late antiquity is the fate of the ancient *polis*, its transformation, decline, and disappearance, and the impact of these developments on the political thought of the time that is increasingly shaped by a Christian discourse. Constantine's reign can again serve as a telling example for the link between *polis* status and Christianity: in Phrygia, he granted the political autonomy of *polis* status to Orcistus, on the grounds that the majority of its population was Christian, while nearby Nacoleia, to which it had been subject, was largely pagan. And in Palestine, he separated the harbor settlement of Maiouma from the city territory of Gaza, because the former had a largely Christian population, while the latter was dominated by its large pagan temples.[11] While the first Christian emperor took the entire world into his purview, he also pursued a decisive strategy to privilege Christians within the context of the *polis*.

In recent decades, our understanding of the *polis* in late antiquity has been greatly advanced by numerous individual studies and conference volumes. Archaeology has done much to provide a better understanding of the fate of individual cities: the crumbling of protective walls; the encroachment of private dwellings onto public streets and places; the neglect and destruction of pagan temples; the lack of repair of large public baths, theaters, and porticoes; and the erection of churches as focal points of the community. Laws and inscriptions corroborate complaints by contemporary authors about the social shifts that were leading to the crystallization of an upper crust of very wealthy citizens and a reduction in the rights and status of the middle class. Regional topographies have shown the overall decline within specific regions in the number of settlements with the size and administrative structure to deserve the designation as "city," thus leading to a more ruralized system of habitation.[12]

[10] See, e.g., Ward-Perkins (2005); Halsall (2007); Heather (2012); Brown (2012).

[11] Eusebius describes the policy at *VC* 4.37–9. On Orcistus, see Van Dam (2007): 150–62, and further discussion by Ando in his Postscript to this volume.

[12] From a large bibliography, see esp. Ward-Perkins (1984); Wickham (1984); Kennedy (1985); Barnish (1988, 1989); Mathisen (1993); Webster and Brown (1997); Camille (2000);

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The written sources complement this picture. Numerous studies investigate the changing power structures within the *polis*: the decline of the *curiales*, the increasing influence of a small group of leading citizens, and the rise of the bishop to greater public prominence. Christianity is added as one of the transformative forces, not only in matters of social power but also in ownership of space. Its impact on the urban fabric becomes noticeable with the great wave of church building in the late fourth and fifth centuries.

This volume introduces a new approach intended to provide a means to integrate the historical markers of this transition, whose treatment has often been disjointed, and to address the uniqueness of late antiquity: the expansion of the framework of political thought and social interaction from the ancient city to the Roman Empire, and the further transformation of these phenomena as a result of the influence of Christianity, which led eventually to an amalgamation of the idea of Christendom with that of empire. By this means, we seek to weave together disparate strands of inquiry that have dominated ancient, late antique, and medieval scholarship in recent years: the fashioning and representation of the self within specific social and political contexts, the mechanisms that led to the establishment and maintenance of empires, and the ancient *polis* and its decline. Our concern is to understand how changes in political framework affect the enactment and articulation of citizenship and public identity.

In order to maintain this focus, we have had to neglect some equally important aspects of this transition. The size of this volume could easily be doubled by incorporating more sophisticated understanding of such basic terms as identity, ethnicity, and nationhood produced in recent scholarship. These approaches have been particularly useful for understanding the all-important changes in Judeo-Christian relations. In order to stay focused on the issues involved in the change of a *polis*-oriented culture into an ecumenical one, here we can refer the reader to only a few of these studies.[13]

The chapters in our study unfold chronologically along three distinct but overlapping lines of inquiry. The first of these involves a dialectic between the localized identity of the *polis* and a universalizing trend that culminated in the Christian *oikoumenē*. The second is the religious process of change from the Greco-Roman pantheon and the Roman imperial cult to a Christian worldview that was directed toward divine realities that exist above this world and beyond its duration in time. This transformation has significant consequences not only for the conceptualization of the role of the emperor but also for the articulation of ideas about citizenship and civic identity. The third

Liebeschuetz (2001c); Lewit (2003); Bowes and Gutteridge (2005); Richter (2011); Brown (2012); Shawcross (2013).

[13] Judaism: Buell (2002); Boyarin (2004); Johnson (2006); ethnicity: Geary (1983); Pohl and Reimitz (1998); Mitchell and Greatrex (2000); Gillett (2002); Curta (2006).

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line of inquiry considers changes in conceptions of space, its real or imagined ownership, and its appropriation for the display of power.

POLIS TO *IMPERIUM*

Our first line of inquiry traces the progressive evolution of the ancient political framework from the independent *polis* of Athens, governed by democratic self-rule, to the Hellenistic kingdoms ruled by monarchs, and on to imperial rule in the Roman Empire. The ancient and late antique *polis* was not just a physical entity but also a community of its citizens. In Chapter 1, Josine Blok analyzes the complex reciprocal relationship between citizens and the gods, on the one hand, and the cohesion and communal belonging among the men and women of a *polis*, on the other. Through careful examination of a number of well-known ancient Greek texts, from archaic poetry and Homer to the tragedians and Demosthenes, she shows how the Greek word *hosios*, that we translate loosely as "pious," governed the complex set of interrelationships by which classical Greeks conceptualized their civic identity. It was religious coordinates that determined the positioning of the free individual, whether male or female, within the community.

The sense of shared civic identity was an important component of the ancient self whose public side had the *polis* as its framework and point of reference. But as early as 776 BCE, when the Olympic games began, Greeks were conscious of an identity larger than that of the *polis* that they shared with others. The pull of this "supra-*polis*" identity is evident in the refusal of the fourth-century BCE philosopher Diogenes to identify himself in the traditional way by association with his *polis*. Instead of saying "Diogenes of Sinope," the great Cynic gadfly would only respond to questions about his city of origin by saying he was a "citizen of the world" (*cosmopolitēs*). The conquests of Alexander the Great and the creation of large territorial states by his successors at the end of that century forced Greek thinkers to try to accommodate the *polis* to the new reality of these entities that dwarfed the traditional boundaries by which they identified themselves.

Under the Hellenistic kings, the ancient *poleis* continued to act as financial, legal, social, and religious centers, but as Rolf Strootman shows in Chapter 2, the monarchic system of rulership encouraged a universalist political ideology that was supraregional. Theories of kingship developed during this age eventually mediated Rome's change from a government centered on a *polis* situated on the banks of the Tiber River to a state that controlled a vast Mediterranean empire. Innovative thinkers during this period defined the new universalism of their age in three ways that profoundly influenced later developments: the ideal of an empire without end, a limitless empire; the use of cosmic, especially solar, imagery as a means of expressing that rule; and the concept of a golden

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age that would be the product of such rule. This Hellenistic ideology had lasting impact for a simple reason: as Strootman concludes, "it worked."

The original seedbed of the polis was the East, and this model of settlement-cum-political structure was further disseminated in the Greek world after Alexander the Great's conquests. Several centuries later, when Rome expanded its empire, this also resulted in a greater degree of urbanization in the conquered territories. This historical preponderance of the *polis* as a Greek phenomenon is also reflected in the balance between Greek- and Latin-themed contributions in this volume.

The affinity between monarchy and universalist claims would be further enhanced by the spread of a monotheistic religion under the Roman Empire. Strong as these universalist ideas were, however, for centuries they had surprisingly little impact on Rome's civic identity. In part, the jury-rigged way in which the empire had been put together was to blame: in a very real sense, the fall of the Roman Republic can be attributed to the Roman Senate's attempt to rule a large, territorial state with institutions created for the *polis*. The way the first emperor, Augustus, obscured his power behind a façade of republican institutions further complicated the problem: indeed, the imperial system could be described as a temporary solution to a crisis that never went away. In Chapter 3, Jill Harries shows how, as late as the second century CE, Roman jurists still struggled to accommodate republican notions of *civitas* to an empire that had spread its citizenship to the farthest reaches of the Mediterranean world. Part of the problem was the fact that the Roman imperial system was "still largely a mosaic of cities." But another contributing factor was the respect for tradition in Roman jurisprudence. "There comes a point," Harries observes, "when tradition inhibits the ability to adapt to, or even acknowledge, new realities."

The Severan dynasty (193–238) has long been singled out as a turning point in imperial administration. But what was once regarded negatively as a "leveling policy" that reduced the primacy that Italy in general and the Senate in particular had continued to enjoy is now seen in a more positive light as the introduction of a truly empirewide perspective. As Harries observes, Severan jurists like Ulpian were not as concerned as their predecessors with "defending or justifying the legal heritage of the City of Rome." Instead, their concern was to rationalize the emperor's de facto power. The best-known result of this process was Ulpian's stipulation of a *lex regia*, whereby the Roman people had delegated to the emperor the legislative power they themselves had wielded in republican assemblies.[14]

As Caroline Humfress observes in Chapter 4, this concern for public law and order should be understood as a unifying and "universalizing" force.

[14] Ulpian in Just., *Digest* 1.4. See Brunt (1977).

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Adopting a "legal anthropological" approach, Humfress studies the extent to which recourse and access to the law define a person's political identity. Her approach brings out the effect of Severan initiatives on political identity. The Antonine Constitution of 212 that made virtually everyone a Roman citizen did not oblige these new citizens to abandon either their local customs or their local identities. Instead, it gave them one more option when they sought legal remedies. Citizens now had multiple identities, and they showed great resourcefulness in opting on any given occasion to assert their imperial or local rights.

Where Humfress challenges a nineteenth-century model of statehood based on the application and enforcement of one unified law, in Chapter 5 Bryan Ward-Perkins shows that a definition of empire that relies exclusively on geographic criteria is equally unsatisfactory. He also points out that the Roman Empire does not fit the center-periphery model, which posits a powerful political and financial center as the focal point for a wide swath of subject and tributary people along the periphery. His detailed analysis of the movements of Roman emperors in the course of the fourth century and of the patterns of extracting and allocating resources (largely through taxation) results in the unexpected vista of an empire "turned inside out," where emperors, surrounded by their court, were constantly on the move between the trouble spots along the borders that were threatened by foreign invaders, with very few of them ever spending a significant amount of time in Rome.

Like Humfress, Ward-Perkins assigns an important role to the Antonine Constitution, which he sees as a "defining moment" in a long process whereby peoples initially conquered by Rome came to identify themselves with the laws and institutions of their sometime overlord. This change makes him wonder whether Rome more fits the modern definition of a "nation" rather than an "empire."

In Chapter 6, Claudia Moatti also casts doubt on the usefulness of the "center-periphery" model for understanding the Roman Empire. Although she, like Humfress, is interested in the multiple identities accessible to the empire's inhabitants, Moatti's aim is to create a dynamic model to explain this new awareness of a common world of shared identities. To do this, she turns away from law and institutions and concentrates instead on the surprising degree of geographic mobility, even for those of only moderate wealth, that the empire facilitated. She finds that as early as the first century BCE Romans were experimenting with different identities, such as residence and citizenship, created as a result of office-holding, marriage, or the ownership of property. "Cosmopolitization" is the term Moatti coins for this process that, far from weakening the cities of the empire, actually wove them together through new networks that transcended local and even regional ties.

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IMPERIUM TO *OIKOUMENĒ*

Caracalla's decision to make virtually all residents of the empire citizens through the Antonine Constitution may have been only symbolically important, but it had very real consequences for Christians, who now were subject to the obligation of citizens to honor the empire's tutelary deities. As divine protection became increasingly important in the third century, empirewide requirements to propitiate these deities snared Christians for the first time in persecutions that were no longer local phenomena.[15] The last and most determined of these was initiated by the emperor Diocletian in 302. The Great Persecution, as Christians remembered it, lasted a decade and led to the elevation of Constantine I (306–337), during whose long reign Christianity for the first time established a secure foothold in the corridors of power.

Christians brought with them an "ecumenical" way of thinking that contrasted sharply with the increased claim to universalism in imperial ideology. But the direction was not entirely one way, and the pull of *polis* thinking also remained strong. The chapters in the second part of the volume all engage with the impact of Christianity by studying its effect on the location of the self in relation to community and space. The foundation of Constantinople as a new imperial capital in the East and the emperors' increasingly sedentary lifestyle gave impetus to reliance on ceremonial and ritual occasions to maintain imperial ties to the soldiery. What was true for the military was true for other constituencies as well. These chapters show how, in the course of the third to the fifth century, imperial claims to rule over all of the Christian *oikoumenē* were expressed not only through law but also through changing spatial consciousness and evolving models of civic leadership in the context of the late antique city.

In Chapter 7, Claudia Rapp uncovers both the enduring impact of *polis* consciousness and the erosion of this concept by Christian universalizing tendencies through her study of the works of Christian preachers in the fourth and fifth centuries. She shows how these preachers attempted to impress Christian converts with the significance of joining the church through baptism by employing the notion of the *polis* as a closed community of people who follow the same way of life.

In Chapter 8, Susanna Elm also finds the *polis* central to Gregory of Nazianzus's strategy for defending actions he took during his time in Constantinople. What stands out from her nuanced reading is the way Gregory manipulated traditional views of civic topography to create a new one based on Christian values. The effect, she concludes, was to reorient, rather than to destroy, traditional

[15] For changes in imperial religion in the third century, see Rives (1999).

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values: the Greek *polis* became the Greek Christian *polis*. Gregory, she writes, preserved "much of the old as a means to imagine the new."

The new topography of Constantinople that Elm emplots, with the help of Gregory of Nazianzus's orations, Michele Renee Salzman also discovers for Rome by studying a sermon of Pope Leo the Great in Chapter 9. Dating Leo's sermon to 440, Salzman shows how Christians crafted a narrative of the traumatic Visigothic sack thirty years earlier that emphasized the mitigating influence of their religion on barbarian appetites. More than by sermons, however, bishops like Leo used innovations in ritual and institutions to assert a new role for themselves that eventually supplanted the influence of the Roman aristocracy. By the late fifth century, the popes had not only appropriated certain locations for church building but also laid a claim to the public commemoration by the entire city of the Visigothic sack. Under the tutelage of the church, this annually recurring public festival asserted Christian dominion not only over the entire urban area but also over the festival calendar of the city. Space and time thus became subject to a Christian reinterpretation, administered by powerful bishops, thanks to the initiative of individual leaders who were able to enact a strong pastoral and political agenda. Just as Gregory in Constantinople created a Greek Christian *polis*, so Leo in the West transformed the city of Rome from a Roman cosmopolis into a Roman Christian cosmopolis.

Space and place as centers for this power contest occupy the attention of Emily Albu and H. A. Drake in the next two chapters.

In Chapter 10, Albu presents a sweeping view of the changing Roman attitudes to maps. Romans appear to have used itineraries – lists of the distances between stopping places – rather than "bird's-eye view" maps to get from one place to another. They saw their empire as an *oikoumenē*, but equation of the city of Rome with this *orbis terrarum* inhibited their ability to think of a world that was truly "universal." This Roman *oikoumenē* belonged quite literally to the emperor: for others merely to possess a world map signaled imperial pretensions that led to their swift demise. Whereas Roman itineraries by design made cities their focal point, Christian maps reflected a set of values that emphasized the connection of every individual to a larger world embodied by the church. By emphasizing territories rather than cities, Christians in late antiquity achieved a "conceptual leap" that, once imperial authority waned in the West, opened the way for Christian maps to serve "as signifiers of dominion over the earth."

In Chapter 11, Drake uses the complex ceremony whereby power was transferred from emperor to emperor to tie together the various strands that created a Christian *oikoumenē* out of the classical *polis*. Eschewing the long-held concept of "Caesaropapism" to characterize the difference between eastern and western Christianity, Drake shows how the eastern church used ceremony and ritual to negotiate a relationship with imperial authority that was in many

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