Introduction
From Imperial to Post-Imperial Space in Late Ancient Historiography

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If time is the first dimension of history, then space is its second, so the saying goes. Time is the more obvious axis against which to plot histories, but historians obviously have to make choices as to which geographical areas to cover. A traditional conundrum for historians of antiquity was how to reconcile a variety of theatres of war with the single course of time. For the narrative to remain coherent, a continuous account was required, but this entailed shifts in geographical focus that threatened the narrative's clarity.[1] One solution was to divide the story into geographical sections, seen in its most explicit form in the *Wars* of Procopius (mid-sixth c.). His first seven books are composed of three units that follow events in Persia, Africa and Italy with hardly any overlap between the books. This choice of structure involved a judgement on the importance of these various theatres in relation to others that did not receive separate treatment. A. Sarantis, for example, has argued that Procopius's presentation results in a modern underestimation of the importance of the Danube border during the reign of Justinian (527–65).[2] Indeed, book 8 of Procopius's *Wars*, which updated the first seven books and offers a single narrative about the various fronts, succeeds in giving a better idea of what happened outside these three major regions, in particular the Danube area. Modern accounts of Justinian's wars of conquest are indeed highly dependent on the literary choices Procopius made, choices that imply a judgement on where history was really happening. As this example shows, for all the importance documentary sources hold, historiography still strongly shapes the geographical focus of the narratives modern scholars offer of the ancient world.[3]

[1] Cf. Purves 2010; de Jong 2012; Maier 2016. [2] Sarantis 2016.
[3] Cf. Humphries 2017 on how modern ancient historians are still dependent on the imperial perspective of their sources. For other attempts to shift the geographical focus of modern narratives, see, e.g., Reed 2009; Fowden 2014 and Frankopan 2015.

While Procopius's example suggests that we are at the mercy of the idiosyncrasies of individual authors, his choices were also shaped by the cultural, social and political conditions of his time. This is the aspect of spatiality in ancient historiography that the present volume is interested in: How do histories reflect the changing space of the later Roman Empire? How does the shifting balance between centre and periphery shape histories? How does the increasing importance of the church affect representations of imperial space? How is the ecclesiastical representation of space shaped by imperial space?

With the Roman dominance over the Mediterranean, historiography became closely linked to the empire: history was written *from* the centre – that is, Rome – and *for* that centre. The correlation between office-holding, social position and literary activity was strong during the empire, and was especially visible in historiography. Tacitus and Cassius Dio are just the most obvious examples of this link. Social status and career, education and literary tradition conspired to produce a culture that had its geographical centre in Rome. P. Gautier Dalché puts it aptly: 'This culture of an ideological nature was a vital condition of building a career in the bureaucracy and grounding administrators' actions in a perception of the unity of the empire'.[4] As analysed by C. Nicolet, the creation of an empire implied not just physical control of a territory but also the claim to knowledge about that territory and what lies beyond – an activity that was directed and perceived from the centre.[5] Developing this idea, S. Benoist has emphasised how a tension always existed between the concept of the empire as a stable entity limited by frontiers, on the one hand, and the idea of permanent conquest, on the other. The empire always laid an implicit claim to what was beyond it.[6] This 'imperial habitus' made historians writing during the Roman Empire imperial historians in three senses: they wrote during the empire, about the empire and from the perspective of the empire.[7] This is true even for historians with

[4] Gautier Dalché 2014: 182: 'Cette culture de nature idéologique était une condition indispensable pour faire carrière dans la bureaucratie et pour donner à l'action des admininistrateurs un sens fondé sur la perception de l'unité de l'empire'. See Lozovsky 2006 for a similar argument relating to the Carolingian period. Note that Witakowski 2007: 221 explains the absence of geographical literature in Syriac by the fact that Syriac speakers did not have an empire to run.

[5] Nicolet 1991. See further Brodersen 1995; Clarke 1999; Hänger 2001; Talbert and Brodersen 2004; Woolf 2011 (who explores further nuances of the link between empire and knowledge); Geus and Rathmann 2013; Rimell and Asper 2017. See Yarrow 2006 on how provincial histories are affected by the Roman Empire; Liddel and Fear 2010 on universal history.

[6] Benoist 2016: 53.

[7] The focus on the emperor, expressed in a biographical format for imperial historiography, is another illustration of how the empire shaped historiography: Zimmermann 1999.

a provincial standpoint. Eunapius, for example, writing towards the end of the fourth century, complains that it was hard for him, a sophist living in Sardis in Asia, to access information about the West[8] and his account reveals his distance to the court. At the same time, his history has as much an imperial perspective as, say, the *breviarium* of Festus written a couple of decades earlier to advise the emperor Valens on his dealings with the Persians. To give a later example: the history of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite, written in Syriac, narrates the conflict between Rome and Persia between 502 and 506 from the viewpoint of border society, but its ideological centre is Rome.[9]

This volume asks what happened to the imperial representation of space in late ancient historiography. In brief, the crucial question for each chapter is: Where is the centre located? We understand space here in the sense of geographical space mediated through narrative. This means that other forms of representing or experiencing space, like travel and urban space, figure only marginally in this book. Through a series of case studies that take us from Constantinople to Armenia and from Spain to the Euphrates, it uses historiography as a lens through which to study what happens to the imperial representation of space in a world where that empire is losing its grip on the Mediterranean. We contend that because historiography tended to be written from the centre, it is a particularly well-suited lens to trace how the imperial representation of space slowly changed under the impact of the transformation of empire. Works of geography, like *Expositio totius mundi et gentium* and the account of Cosmas Indicopleustes, therefore, only feature occasionally here, but we hope that the results of this volume will be of interest for historians of geography also.

Much like ancient historiography, late antique historiography is a large body of text and this volume only offers a series of case studies. However, we contend that the changes these case studies allow us to trace have wider validity. We shall see that the imperial habitus was slow to die – indeed, if it really died before being resurrected in the Carolingian Empire and at the Byzantine court of Constantine Porphyrogenitus (913–59).[10] At the same time, there were many factors that shed doubt on the stability of the empire

[8] Eunapius of Sardis, *History* F55 and F66 (Blockley 1981–2).

[9] Trombley and Watt 2000. Other examples of the distinction between a provincial standpoint and the imperial perspective are the *Philotheos historia* by Theodoret of Cyrrhus (Perrin 2001) and the chronicler Hydatius, on whom see Chapter 2 by Van Nuffelen. See also Perrin 1997 on Gregory of Tours.

[10] Cf. Lozovsky 2006; Treadgold 2013: 153–96.

and its centre, not least the fragmentation of the West and the rise of the church, which was both closely aligned with the empire and represented a potential alternative focus. Indeed, late ancient culture, as reflected in historiography, can already be said to reflect a post-imperial perspective before the end of empire: the empire remained the major point of reference, but its centrality was no longer a mere matter of fact. The centre was destabilised and challenged by alternatives (successor kingdoms, the church, the major rival Persia). This volume is interested in the dynamic that this post-imperial situation generated in historiography.

The Imperial Habitus in Late Antiquity

Let me start by noting that the 'ideological culture' sketched by P. Gautier Dalché remained largely in place in late antiquity. There is an abundance of geographical literature from the period, most of which reproduces 'classical' knowledge and is aimed at a school context. The surviving works of Julius Honorius, Vibius Sequester, Ampelius, Solinus, Martianus Capella and the Latin translation of Dionysius Periegetes by Priscian bear clear witness to their role in rhetorical training, as does the continued popularity of Pomponius Mela.[11] These texts unfailingly reproduce the imperial perspective of their sources or, in the case of Pomponius Mela, of their time of writing. Another indication of the imperial habitus' continued vitality is that one easily finds references in late ancient literature to claims to world rule, often but not always directly emanating from or directed at the court.[12] Ethnography was still a continuous presence within late ancient historiography. Establishing the nature of the difference between the empire's insiders and outsiders, it made it possible for foreign peoples to be integrated into the imperial perspective, allowing, for example, a place to be found for the hitherto unknown Huns.[13] Ethnography underscored the superiority of the empire, even if (or especially when) foreign peoples were used as a positive foil for the moral decline of the empire, as Tacitus had done in the *Germania*.[14] Even a late ancient

[11] Cf. *Panegyrici Latini* 9 (4) 20.2, mentioning a geographical map at rhetoric school. See Wolska-Conus 1978; Humphries 2007; Maas 2007; Johnson 2012. For overviews of Christian texts, see Inglebert 2001; Günther 2007 (emphasising decline); Schleicher 2014.

[12] E.g., *Panegyrici latini* 10 (11)7.7, cf. 8(5) 20.2; Corippus, *Ioannis* 2.382–3, 3.5–10. See further Inglebert 2015: 21–2: Traina 2013 and 2015; Chapter 2.

[13] Eunapius of Sardis, *History* F41 (Blockley); Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2. Cf. Dagron 1987: 215 for the idea that writing meant stabilising the flux that marks late antiquity.

[14] See Kaldellis 2013: 1–25 for an overview. On Ammianus, see Vergin 2013. Maas 2003: 156 argues that Christians do not do ethnography, but see Stevenson 2002–3. On its resurrection in the Carolingian period, see Lozovsky 2006.

innovation, the geographical surveys of the world, with which the historians Orosius and, in his wake, Jordanes opened their histories, betrays a perspective centred on the empire.[15] Besides education and an elite identification with the empire, which remained the major conduit for social advancement, travel has been highlighted as a factor in fostering a view of the empire as a unity and hence identification with the imperial perspective.[16] Travel is indeed well documented for this period, beyond the rise of pilgrimage.[17] Trade was important, but other forms of travel are plentifully attested for the later empire, too: embassies travelled back and forth to foreign rulers, spies infiltrated the enemy, refugees left their homes, exiles were sent to distant corners and officials moved around the empire.[18] Connectivity, as much as education, was a product of empire that sustained the imperial habitus.

Challenges from Within and Without

While this ensured that Rome continued to be seen as the centre of the world, that centrality was destabilised by various factors. The first challenge came from within. The tetrarchical regime of multiple travelling emperors meant an inexorable decline in Rome's political importance. The strong emphasis of the tetrarchs on political and filial unity obviously sought to counteract possible centrifugal tendencies.[19] While the return to single imperial rule in 325 eliminated one challenge to unity and hence to the centrality of Rome, Constantine's decision to found Constantinople set in motion a process that would create a new centre for what moderns tend to see as a new empire, the Byzantine one. As Anthony Kaldellis shows in Chapter 1, Constantinople was very slow to occupy the central place in late ancient historiographical narrative that modern accounts tend to attribute to it from the late fourth century onwards on political grounds. Indeed, it was the perceived fall of Rome in 476 that seemed to open up space in the mental geography of the late

[15] Merrills 2005. This is true, even if Orosius shows a post-imperial awareness of the possible end of the empire (cf. Orosius, *Histories* 5.2; Van Nuffelen 2012: 170–86). For further integrations of geographical accounts and historiography, see book 1 of the *Excerpta latina barbari*, the Syriac *Chronicle of 724*, and book 12 of Pseudo-Zachariah's *Church History*.

[16] Perrin 1997.

[17] Newbold 1983; Adams and Laurence 2001; Macrides 2002; Ellis and Kidner 2004; Dietz 2005. On the relative ease of movement within the empire and some restrictions, see Tacoma 2016 and de Ligt and Tacoma 2016.

[18] Lounghis 1980; Lee 1993; McCormick 2001; Gillett 2003; Nechaeva 2014; Washburn 2012; Hillner 2016.

[19] Van Dam 2007: 35–78.

Roman elite,[20] leading them to embrace and represent Constantinople as the centre of the empire. Once in this position, Constantinople was as hard to dislodge as Rome had once been. Writing at a time of persecution for his Miaphysite church at the end of the sixth century, and doing so in Syriac, not a language of the imperial elite, the church historian John of Ephesus still wrote from an 'imperocentric' perspective with Constantinople at its heart, as Hartmut Leppin shows in his contribution (Chapter 5).[21]

The imperial habitus was shaken but not immediately brought down by the exogenous shocks that characterise late antiquity from the fifth century onwards. The barbarian invasions, especially from the fifth century onwards, set in motion a process that eventually resulted in the dismemberment of the empire in the West. While the empire soon lost effective control over important parts of Africa, Spain and Gaul and these processes were instantly recorded in historiography, they were slow to impact on the mental geography. Even dramatic events like the sack of Rome in 410 may have had less of an impact than often thought.[22] The chronicles of the West retain an imperial perspective, be it sometimes a disenchanted one as in the Gallic *Chronicle of 452*.[23] Alternative conceptions are slow to emerge but become tangible towards the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh century. In Chapter 4, Mark Humphries describes how the Visigothic chronicler John of Biclaro suggested the transferral of centrality from the Roman Empire to the Visigothic Kingdom, built on the perceived lapse of the empire into heresy and the conversion of the kingdom to Catholicism under Reccared I (586–601). Ecclesiastical ideas about a nation's chosen status thus helped to break the hold of the empire – a process that can be seen in even more developed form in the historiographical oeuvre of Isidore of Seville.[24]

If the West was, by the end of the sixth century, largely lost to the empire, the East was shaken too. External threats by the Goths, Huns and Persians were matched by internal ones, such as the ever-restless Isaurians. In the fifth century, they rose to a force to be reckoned with, allowing Zeno to become emperor. His death in 491 and the Isaurians' attempt to retain power against the new emperor Anastasius generated a backlash: in a war

[20] Praet 2018 studies the effect of the 'fall' on sixth-century elites in Constantinople.
[21] See Wood 2010 for the very slow move away from the Roman Empire among Syriac speakers.
[22] Van Nuffelen 2015 with further references. [23] See Van Nuffelen's Chapter 2 on Hydatius.
[24] Wood 2012. Although a study of identity, Reimitz 2015 shows how historiography in Gaul from the sixth century onwards develops from a post-imperial genre to one that acquires a new imperial focus on the Carolingian family.

that lasted until 498, Anastasius rooted out any meaningful Isaurian opposition once and for all.[25] The most enduring opposition to the Roman Empire came from Sasanian Persia. Warfare was intermittent, especially in the sixth century, with the sack of Antioch in 538 as the most important event in symbolic terms. While fourth-century warfare is accompanied by a proliferation of historical works recalling past victories over the Persians, including those of Alexander the Great,[26] the sixth century imagines the relationship of the two powers on a more equal footing. After Justinian closed the Athenian Academy in 529, the historian Agathias tells us, seven philosophers travelled to the Persian king Chosroes in 531 to practice their philosophy in freedom.[27] In the story, the Persian king appears as a possible equivalent to the Roman emperor. Narrating events of the same decade, Procopius depicted Chosroes as assuming the role of emperor during his occupation of Apamea, presiding over chariot races and meting out justice, yet the presentation is skewed to show how unreliable he is.[28] In both cases, Chosroes fails to live up to the expectations Romans project onto him, and Agathias and Procopius thus reject the equality that their stories initially suggest. In a letter to the emperor Maurice, Chosroes II described Rome and Persia as the two eyes of the world, a vision of equality that Roman sources record but do not endorse.[29] Even so, there now seems to be an alternative to the Roman Empire. The proliferation from the fourth century onwards of the term *Romania* to designate the territory held by Rome indicates an awareness of its limitations and creates a strict parallel with other territories, such as *Gothia* or *Germania*.[30] Rome now can become just one of many regions of the world. In Chapter 2, Peter Van Nuffelen argues we see another sign of this doubt concerning the empire in sixth-century historiography produced in Constantinople. Procopius and Jordanes in particular have an interest in the margins of the world, especially distant islands. This can be read as a reaffirmation of the power of the centre faced with the pressure that peoples coming from the margins put on the empire. Such signs that alternatives to *Romania* are possible are important in the light of the

[25] Cf. Meier 2009; Feld 2012.
[26] Esp. Julius Valerius, *The History of Alexander the Great* and the *Itinerarium Alexandri*; Festus, *Breviarium*, with Lane Fox 1997.
[27] Agathias, *Histories* 2.30.3–4, with Watts 2006: 138–42; Börm 2007: 277–83.
[28] Procopius, *Wars* 2.11.36–8. For the context, see Börm 2007: 251–68.
[29] Theophylact Simocatta, *Ecumenical History* 4.11.2, with Dignas and Winter 2007: 238–9. See Canepa 2009: 34–52; McDonough 2011 for positive Roman views about the Sasanians.
[30] Inglebert 2015: 21–2 for references. Wolfram 1979: 27 notes that through this usage Rome becomes one *gens* among many.

tendency for imperial discourse to be exclusive and to claim world dominance. This is one of the themes in Tim Greenwood's chapter (Chapter 3) on Armenian conceptions of space. Armenia was split between Rome and Persia. Armenian discourse from Persian Armenia tended to envisage Armenia as an autonomous entity and/or part of Ērānšahr. This orientation towards the East was not changed by the conversion to Christianity. Moreover, no sources from Roman Armenia survive and Greenwood suggests that that discourse, expressing possibly the same autonomy, was silenced by Roman imperial power.

Christianity and Imperial Space

The rise of Christianity is the other major feature of late antiquity, and research has often emphasised that it created new perceptions of space that differ from the imperial one. Christianity attributed symbolic centrality to holy places and in particular Jerusalem, the centrality of which was emphasised by literary means through pilgrimage literature.[31] Leaving one's home could be a spiritual experience.[32] Much as the reading of classical literature generated the need for geographical training, the Bible conveyed its own geography that needed to be understood and explained.[33] The movements of apostles, tracked in traditional and apocryphal gospels, created an alternative geography that spanned the known world.[34] The emphasis on God's activity everywhere could turn purely local events into universal ones.[35] Places at the margins, like the desert or Mount Sinai, could assume centrality by virtue of being the scenes of God's favour. In a famous formula, monasticism brings the desert into the city: it blurs and confirms the border lines. Furthermore, Philippe Blaudeau has meticulously explored how the various church historians project different centres of orthodoxy, depending on their own geographical standpoint and their doctrinal preference. Besides the Constantinopolitan focus of Socrates, there is the Antiochene one of Theodoret of Cyrrhus and the Alexandrian one of Zachariah Scholasticus. Coining the term 'geo-ecclesiology', Blaudeau ties these representations to the policies and visions of the sees, all of which pursued strategies to achieve centrality in their own

[31] See, e.g., Maraval 1985; Elsner 2000; Humphries 2007: 43 and further literature cited in Chapter 7 by Johnson.
[32] E.g., the priest Bachiarius in Gennadius, *De viris illustribus* 24.
[33] Stenger 2016.
[34] Johnson 2011, 2015.
[35] E.g., Elishe, *History of Vardan Mamikonean* 7, p. 192 on how local Armenian events are depicted as having universal importance. See also van der Vliet 2006: 54–5; Muehlberger 2015.

understanding of ecclesiastical geography.[36] This type of analysis can be usefully extended to other ecclesiastical authors: Dionysius of Tell-Mahre, as shown in Chapter 6 by Philip Wood, succeeded in depicting his own Syrian Orthodox church as the only Christian church in the East from Alexandria to Baghdad, thus effectively obliterating his Nestorian and Greek Orthodox counterparts.

As this brief survey shows, there can be little doubt that Christian literature offers a more varied representation of space than that found in secular literature. However, Christian representations of space complicated imperial geography but did not contradict it. As is well known, the institutional geography of the church was largely modelled on that of the empire and the geo-ecclesiology described by Blaudeau plays out within the empire, with sufficient imperial involvement: the pentarchy established by Justinian, which balanced the five patriarchal sees, was an imperial construction. Pilgrimage literature is a predominantly Latin genre and altogether absent in Syriac, as observed by Scott Johnson in Chapter 7: it may be as much an imperial as a Christian type of text and therefore it may be dangerous to read the genre as reflecting 'the' Christian conception of space. Scholars have emphasised the universalism inherent in the Christian urge to convert all nations, sometimes suggesting that this marks a difference to the localised empire and that Christianity remodelled the frontiers. Yet, as we have seen, the empire also laid claim to world dominion, meaning that Roman imperialism and Christian universality were not necessarily mutually exclusive.[37] The Christian reimagination of the edges of the world was not unrelated to earlier imperial conceptions, as the association of the biblical Gog and Magog with the Alexander legend illustrates.[38]

The best indication of the entanglement of ecclesiastical and imperial conceptions of centrality is that political change was needed as a trigger for alternative conceptions, which were underpinned by ecclesiastical visions, to take hold. As stated in the preceding text, the idea of transferral from Rome to Visigothic Spain expressed by John of Biclaro is the product of the loss of the empire's grip on the West and the conversion of Spain to Catholicism. As illustrated by Wood's chapter, it was only when the Arab conquest cut Syriac speakers off from the empire that alternative

[36] Blaudeau 2006, 2017.
[37] E.g., Maas 2003; Nasrallah 2005; Fürst 2007; Humphries 2007; Maier 2011; Pollmann 2011. For further discussion of Christian universality, as attributed to Christian historiography, see Van Nuffelen 2010; Inglebert 2014.
[38] Van Donzel and Schmidt 2010: 15–49.

conceptions were developed. While Melkite and Maronite histories from the early Islamic period continued to look towards the West, in Syriac Orthodox ('Miaphysite') histories there are remnants of the preceding ecclesiastical geography, especially in the concentration on the sees of Alexandria and Antioch as the heartlands of orthodoxy. Yet the story is now focused on councils and bishops that contributed to a 'Syriac' identity. The Islamic empire did not replace the Roman one as a focal point, but – as the neglect of territories farther east shows – the geographical emphasis lay on the Middle Eastern centre from which the elite who wrote these histories stemmed. Indeed, in a context where the empire still stood, as in the case of John of Ephesus analysed by Hartmut Leppin, even persecution did not lead an abandoning of the empire.

Creating Space in Narrative

So far we have been looking at historiography as a reflection of changes in the political and mental geography of the Roman Empire. Yet texts never simply reflect their cultural context, they also engage with it: they are creative and sometimes idiosyncratic ways of imparting meaning to reality. The spatial setting is a crucial element in the representation of an event and an important clue to how the historian hopes his narrative will be understood. It is no accident that Procopius narrates an episode in which the Persian king Chosroes presides over games in the hippodrome: the hippodrome was the place where interaction between ruler and subjects took place in Constantinople. [39] To give another example: Rufinus's description of the so-called destruction of the Serapeum has the pagans residing artificially many days in the temple where they perform human sacrifices, thus having pagans do archetypally pagan things in this archetypally pagan place.[40] While these are examples of adjusting the setting for the narrative, creativity sometimes went further. When Constantinople emerges as the central place in historiography, that is, the early sixth century, accounts of the city's mythical and distant past start being recorded, *in casu* by Hesychius of Miletus.[41] This reflects a mechanism also seen in the production of late ancient patria. These celebrations of local history tend to be written for cities that achieved new importance in the reordered empire of Diocletian and Constantine, which created new 'corridors of empire'.

[39] Pfeilschifter 2013: 294–355.
[40] Rufinus, *Ecclesiastical History* 11.22–3 with Van Nuffelen 2018: 133–41, with further references. Isele 2010 is a fine analysis of the role of space in religious conflict.
[41] See Chapter 1 by Kaldellis.