Historiography and space: a position paper (version May 2014)

Time and space are two main dimensions of a historical narrative. Scholarship has so far focused mainly on the temporal dimension of late ancient historiography. In particular, a concern with linear narrative has been read into the prominence of chronicles in this period. Yet historiography is also eminently concerned with space: events take place in certain locations, most histories have a specific geographical focus, and within chronicles the geographical focus shifts, usually from Israel over the East to Rome and 'post-Rome' – to name but three features.

I History and geography in the (late) ancient world

In the classical world, historiography and geography were closely related genres: geographical and ethnographical digressions were integrated into historiography, whereas geographical writers like Strabo could not but include important historical information. In this respect, there is a high degree of continuity between ancient and late ancient practices. Orosius opened his history with a long description of the world, and Jordanes dedicates substantial space to geographical digressions. Ethnographical digressions continued in classicising history (e.g. Priscus; Procopius) and were also integrated into ecclesiastical history (Sozomen). Geograpical information, such as lists of provinces, place names, or biblical places, was routinely included in chronographies, such as the 'Alexandrian chronography'. In a fracturing world, geographical works helped to identify origins of peoples and locate them in relation to the author's own position: such interests can be traced from the Ostrogothic court to the 'Frankish table of nations' and the Armenian polymath Anania Shirakatsi. They could also serve to orient the reader in the heritage of traditional culture, as the list of rivers mentioned in the poetical canon by Vibius Sequester illustrates.

It has emerged in recent years that official dispatches, embassies, missions and other forms of travel were an important source for late ancient historiography. This is most tangible in the works of Nonnosus and Zemarchus, each relying on his own experience as an ambassador. In the ninth century, Dionysius of Tell-Mahre included an account of his visit to Egypt. In other histories, such narratives serve as sources: the travels of Theophilus 'the Indian' are narrated at length by Philostorgius, providing an occasion for a display of knowledge. The use of official accounts has been hypothesised for early seventh century works (George the Pisidian). Even Cosmas Indikopleustes seems to have relied on such travel information. On this type of literature was grafted the flowering of travelogues in late Antiquity, exemplified in Palladius' account of the Brahmans, the so-called history of Zosimus, and in several apocryphal gospels.

Finally, scholarship has demonstrated how works of history had a distinct geographical focus. This may be the location where the work was written, as in Socrates' church history (Constantinople), or the place where the audience lived for which the work was primarily conceived, as is the case with Ammianus' history, which is clearly Rome-focused. As this last example shows, the explicit geographical focus (that is, the places the historian most talks about) need not be identical with its implicit focus: Olympiodorus of Thebes, even when his main interest seems to be the West, was, in fact, focused on Constantinople. In reworking Cassiodorus, Jordanes may have introduced a more Eastern focus. In Late Antiquity, the models for historiography originated within the Roman Empire and focused on this empire. Yet many histories were composed outside its borders or after its fall and thus had to position themselves vis-à-vis the old centre. Some revaluated the periphery as equally valid testimonies to God's will (Hydatius); others like Dionysius of Tell-Mahre saw the Roman Empire loose its dominant position in favour of the Arabs.

II Space and geography in late Antiquity

Respectful towards the great authorities such as Claudius Ptolemaeus, late antique authors continued to produce geographical treatises, *itineraria* and maps. There was an obvious interest in transmitting traditional knowledge and putting it to new uses. In scholarship the following themes have been foregrounded in recent years:

Borders. Scholarship has for a long time focused on the notion of a border. For the Later Roman Empire in particular, it has been questioned to what degree the idea of a border as a strict separation between two territories and people actually makes sense. Interest has now shifted towards border zones as areas of interaction. The Roman state tried to get control over such border zones, by as diverse means as the construction of fortifications, treaties with border peoples such as the Arab tribes, and formal agreements with rival powers, in particular the Persians. It has been argued, by contrast, that the early Muslim perception of empire was one in which the territory was seen as stretching outwards from a core zone, seeing zones of diminishing control and commitment. Whatever the degree of intensity with which they were drawn, borders were instrumental in creating identities. Besides the inevitable mutual influences in border zones, a people could be constructed as not belonging to the empire, either by others – one only has to think of the Byzantine propaganda concerning the Vandals, - or by themselves. On the other hand, certain qualities could also lead to the bridging of borders. The acceptance of the Christian Goths within the empire is a clear example. Physical borders thus overlapped with religious and ideological ones. The clearest literary form in which this was expressed was ethnography: the description of foreign people as foreign, often drawing on traditional models and stereotypes (in particular about the 'barbarian'). Yet that genre also hints at the fascination for what lies beyond the familiar: ethnography could also be used to question the cultural and political suppositions of one's own society (Priscus).

Travel. The ancient world was one of lively contacts and exchange. Commerce played an important role, but other forms of travel are well documented for the later empire too: embassies travelled back and forth to foreign rulers, spies infiltrated the enemy in various disguises, refugees left their homes, officials moved around the empire, and travel for religious reasons expanded substantially. Pilgrimage is possibly the most visible form of travel in late Antiquity, but it should be noted that this does not exhaust religious travel: synods required bishops to travel, and clergymen had to pay regular visits to villages within their diocese. ‘Persecuted’ church leaders, such as Severus of Antioch, spent a major part of their life on the move. The practice of pilgrimage and the narratives produced by pilgrims have been shown to produce new perceptions of space: the biblical past became tangible in specific locations, and the liturgical year in Jerusalem started to be organized around specific places. Places came to be associated with specific saints and events in their lives, spurring the production of texts that sought to demonstrate that link. Historical and religious memory came to be closely linked to specific locations. At the same time, these narratives tend to shift the focus of imperial space away from traditional centers towards, in particular, Jerusalem.

The perception of space. As just noted, pilgrimage narratives effectively reshaped the perception of space. Space is thus not a mere natural extension in three dimensions: it is part of the environment of man and thus deeply imbued with meaning. Such meanings can be analyzed from various perspectives. In an age of Empire, space was politically meaningful. Indeed, as was shown by C. Nicolet, the expansion of the empire led to a renewed interest in geography: the control of space went hand in hand with the control of knowledge about it. Such impulses continued in Late Antiquity: the Ostrogothic court developed an interest in geography, just as the Byzantine court tried to keep track of the various peoples. Lists that ranked the episcopal sees, such as the oriental *notitiae episcopatum*, both visualised the spread of a Church as well as its hierarchy of power in a given area. It has been argued that the Carolingian interest in classical geography was driven by the new conquests of the age and the rediscovery of the ancient heritage: in other words, the resurgence of empire. Contrary to views that emphasize late ancient particularism, it is important to keep the ideological claim to universality in mind. Within the empire, civic space was heavily marked by ceremonial practices: specific routes were usually taken during *adventus* cermonies, the hippodrome was a place of mass gatherings, etc. Similarly, Christian buildings started to mark the civic landscape and lend new meanings to it. Religious strife often centred around disputed buildings, or around places that were linked to symbolic events. Christianization has often been analyzed as an engine for change in practices and perceptions, but it is important to embed religious change in wider political and social changes.

III Historiography and space: further questions.

Within the context of recent scholarship as set out above, this workshop wishes to focus on the unique contribution of historiography to perceptions and conceptions of space in Late Antiquity. Three areas are singled out:

Authoritative geographies. Given the importance of history in legal and scholarly arguments, as well as for identity formation, historiography was a genre that produced and claimed authority. This authority was backed up by the self-presentation of the historian as a voice to be listened to, as well as the reference to, and use of, previous authorities. But historiography also produced geographies of authority.

(a) The term of geo-ecclesiology, recently coined by P. Blaudeau, conceptualizes how church historians refocused their histories on centres of doctrinal authority and had their narratives revolve around these (e.g. Zacharias Scholasticus on Alexandria; Theodorus Lector on Constantinople; Evagrius on Antioch). In doing so, they reshaped the hierarchy of patriarchal sees to the advantage of their focal point. This type of analysis can be usefully extended to other ecclesiastical authors: Dionysius of Tell-Mahre, for example, 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.

(b) Yet it can also be extended to secular authors and chronicle writers. Late Antiquity witnesses a proliferation of peripheral (or eccentric) views on the empire: Hydatius writes in a distant corner of Spain, and Moses Khorenatsi is at pains to stress the links between Armenia and the Empire. Do such authors show an awareness of their peripheral situation, and if so, what strategies (if any) do they develop to overturn this and arrogate authority and importance for their narratives? Do Rome and Constantinople continue to be recognized as the centers, or are they progressively displaced in the perception of late ancient historians?

(c) Finally, how is ethnography, the description of customs of people that do not belong to the empire, made to contribute to the creation of a geography of authority? Is this an area where we witness mere continuity with earlier practice, or do we see, in parallel to the ‘rebarbarization’ of some people in the empire, the development of an ethnography that seeks to describe inhabitants of the empire as foreigners? What do such developments teach us about the perception of the empire and its geography as a focal point of authority in late Antiquity?

The temporal dimension of space. Time and space constantly interact. Attention for the changing quality of space and its deep temporal dimension seems to have marked late antique historiography. (a) We notice the proliferation of what I would like to call ‘geo-genealogies’. The origins of peoples were linked to specific geographical origins. The famous narratives about Scandza (Jordanes) or Thule (Procopius) come to mind, but similar attitudes can be traced elsewhere too (e.g. Life of Kings, in Kartlis Cxovreba). The geographical origin, however distant, was supposed to say something about the character of the people. Similarly, the attempts to tie contemporary people into the Old Testament narrative usually implied a geographical perspective too (see Bardesain; chronicles): just as Abraham travelled to Israel, many peoples were supposed to have wandered before arriving at their current location.

(b) There also seems to have been a correlation between the time/space interaction and views about centrality: the outer parts of the world are progressively conceived of as timeless and unchanging, whereas historical events are supposed to be taking place near the center. With what tools are such perspectives constructed and what do they teach us about underlying perceptions of

time and space?
(c) Notwithstanding classicizing tendencies, late ancient historiography was acutely aware of the changing nature of geography. Constantinople was known to have had a history before it became Constantinople, and the Christianization of space heightened the awareness for the pagan past it covered. Indeed, in the sixth century one might talk of an ‘invented paganization’ of space in that a pagan past was found were there may have been none. Lists of classical place-names were produced with their contemporary equivalent. At the same time, biblical names would be listed and explained (Eusebius’ *Onomasticon* and Jerome’s translation). In other words, can we detect a more subtle temporal stratigraphy in perceptions of space than the surface narratives of triumphant Christianization?

Geographies of meaning. As noted above, space is invested with meaning: the urban landscape is not an accidental succession of streets and buildings, but invested with meaning by social interaction. Ritual events such as adventus ceremonies or executions, historical events such as religious conflicts, but also localizations of apostolic activity all rendered the late antique landscape dense with meaning. Historiography actively participated in that process. (a) Historians situate the episodes they describe in meaningful settings so as to generate meaning for their narrative: Procopius narrates, for example, how Chosroes tried to act as a Roman emperor in the Antiochene hippodrome, the symbolic place for the interaction between the people and the emperor in late Antiquity. Rufinus describes how the Alexandrian pagans held their last stand in the temple of Serapis. How is meaning generated in historiographical narrative by a particular spatial setting?
(b) In an even more active way, historians can *create* space, often mythical: Jordanes’ description of the outer rim of the world is built around allusions to Vergil and is thus a conscious creation of space. Other para- (or pseudo-)historiographical texts, such as Pseudo-Nilus’ narrations and the travels of Zosimus, select and create a particular space for the events they purport to describe: the Sinai as the habitat for bloodthirsty pagan Arabs (Nilus) and the end of the world as an approximation of paradise (Zosimus). How do historians actively create a spatial setting for their narrative, how do these interact, and how are we to decode these?
(c) Finally, historians sometimes include mirabilia: places of wonder (e.g. Nennius, Philostorgius; see also parahistorical texts such as Palladius on the brahmans). What is the meaning of such an inclusion: what kind of view of space, the landscape, and nature does it betray?