

Intercultural Exchange in Late Antique Historiography

Position paper for a workshop on Intercultural Exchange and Historiography in Late Antiquity

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Scholarly paths to Intercultural Exchange

Until recent times scholarship tended to neglect, or to address only in a tangential way, the issue of intercultural exchanges in the ancient past. Although being well aware of them, most scholars looked at contacts and exchanges among different cultures in Antiquity and the Middle Ages rather as a negative feature or as not essential for understanding a given society. As a consequence, intercultural exchange was not often studied as a specific topic before the second half of the past century – with some notorious exceptions, such as the works of Max Müller, Hermann Usener, Franz Cumont. Though already used by Aby Warburg at the beginning of the 20th century, the very phrase ‘cultural exchange’ is a relatively new acquisition in the lexicon of cultural history. This long neglect was due, on one hand, to the resilience of a positivistic pattern that looked at the past in terms of rise-decline-fall of empires and dominant cultures. But on the other hand it can also be ascribed to the self-representation that ancient cultures themselves feed us through the sources: ancient Greek claims of not having inherited nor borrowed anything from the ‘barbarians’; the triumphal march of Christianity over paganism depicted in the ecclesiastical histories; the purported immutability of Byzantium, preserving the essence of the Roman Empire in the East.

The increase of interest in intercultural encounters ran parallel to the fading of the model of ‘golden age and decline’, with its view of cultures as ‘monolithic’ and totally ‘autochthon’, and its sometimes judgmental attitude toward historical developments. It was certainly fostered by the rediscovery of cultural history in the 1970s, particularly with the turn in the field labelled ‘New Cultural History’, and, as Peter Burke observed, it mirrors as well the ‘age of cultural globalization’ we currently live in. In the case of ancient and medieval history, the increased attention for intercultural encounters is also due to a more critical approach to the sources – deeper hermeneutical reading, firmer awareness of writing conventions and rhetorical codes – that led to the debunking of some major historiographical myths advocated by the sources themselves as well as to the production of more nuanced pictures of ancient and medieval societies and cultures (e.g. the process of ‘Hellenization’ analysed more critically by Momigliano first, and then by Bowersock; or the thorny question of the influence of the surrounding peoples on the birth and early development of Islamic civilisation, tackled by controversial studies such as Crone-Cook’s and Wansbrough’s, or the recent study by Aziz al-Azmeh).

Undoubtedly, a most powerful propeller for the studies on intercultural exchange in the ancient and early medieval world was the blurring of chronological and geographical borders brought about by the ‘discovery’ of Late Antiquity. After Peter Brown’s ground-breaking works, it is tempting to see in Late Antiquity a sort of ‘golden age’ of intercultural encounters. The world of

Late Antiquity seems to have no external borders but many centres, spread mainly around the Mediterranean area, but reaching out to Britain and Ireland, Ethiopia, the Caucasus and even China. The fall of the Western Roman Empire is no longer seen as a rigid break and the chronological framework of Late Antiquity has been stretched by the different scholars from before Constantine the Great until after the Islamic expansion. From the linguistic point of view, the polarisation Latin-Greek fades away and many other literary languages need to be taken into account: Persian, Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, Armenian, Georgian... Also the ostensible religious uniformisation under the dome of Christianity appears actually rich in shades if one looks at the many distinctions present in Christianity itself (Eastern Christianity and Western Christianity, orthodoxies and heterodoxies, official dogma and every-day religiosity, ...), or at how much Christian spirituality and theology are indebted to their Semitic background and to Greek philosophy. Finally, the political fragmentation of the West after 476 is somehow echoed by the multi-ethnic, polyglot and culturally polycentric Byzantine Empire in the East.

However, it certainly does not elude the more attentive readers of Peter Brown's books that such a colourful picture of Late Antiquity as a 'melting pot' is meant to be put into perspective, to be critically approached and at times even challenged, through comparisons with what came before and after, as through further research on intercultural exchange in Late Antiquity itself. In this respect, literary sources, and historiographical sources in particular, are important from two points of view: they testify to intercultural contacts in their narratives (revealing them or concealing them, boasting or disapproving of them, ...) but are also conditioned, sometimes even deeply shaped, by cross-cultural influences, borrowings, and appropriations. This workshop aims both at assessing the impact of intercultural exchanges on late antique history writing, and at contributing to scholarship on intercultural dynamics in Late Antiquity by focussing on the testimony offered by historiographical sources.

1. Intercultural Exchange in Late Antiquity: aspects of an inter-disciplinary issue

In order to set the papers on historiography against an appropriate backdrop, the first panel will have a larger scope. We welcome presentations generally dedicated to phenomena of intercultural exchange in Late Antiquity, and addressing particularly the following points:

- a. traces of intercultural exchange in sources other than historiographical ones, including literary (hagiographical, rhetorical, liturgical texts, narrative, poetry, ...) and documentary sources (legal texts, acts of councils, official documents, papyri, epigraphy, ...), as well as material ones (art, architecture, artifacts and objects, ...);
- b. possible influences among different kinds of text across cultural borders (translations, topoi, narratives, anecdotes and patterns migrating from one genre to another, literary texts influencing non-literary texts and vice-versa, contacts between written and material culture, ...);
- c. more generic questions concerning the very definition of 'intercultural exchange' in the late antique world: how do we draw cultural borders? what kinds of interaction does the

word 'exchange' imply? are these conscious dynamics? are cultural conflicts potential occasions for cultural exchange?

2. *Intercultural Exchange and Late Antique Historiography*

The core of the workshop will investigate the impact of intercultural contacts on historiography first of all through case-studies analysing the exchange of historiographical materials across cultural borders (inter-religious and intra-religious borders, linguistic borders, political and ethnical borders, ...):

- a. full or partial translations of historiographical texts, or texts containing traces of sources originally written in another language (with a focus on how the process of translation impacts on the meanings carried by the original text);
- b. 'cultural translation' of historiographical texts, namely their adaptation and reworking to fit a cultural context distinct from the original one;
- c. examples of different uses made of the same sources by various dependants in different cultural contexts.

Equally welcome are papers with a broader approach, illuminating how the less rigid separation of languages and cultures in the late antique world is reflected in the historical writing of the period, and particularly in:

- d. historiographical genres (new genres? adaptation of classical genres? blending of pre-existing genres?);
- e. the historiographical language (how does the language of historiographical texts evolve, or not, and what influence may cross-cultural contacts have on this aspect?);
- f. the conceptualisation of history itself (i.e. how philosophy of history, theology of history, interpretative patterns and *Weltanschauung* change in consequence of contacts with other cultures).

Finally, we would like to see papers engage with the theoretical questions raised by this kind of 'liminal studies':

- g. problems of methodology, with particular attention to delicate issues such as oral transmission, lost sources, 'living texts' and all the problems posed by the use of an inter-disciplinary approach;
- h. the meeting-grounds (or battle fields) of research on intercultural exchange with other recent scholarly trends, such as studies on identity formation and memory building, gender studies, micro-history, post-colonialism, ...;
- i. the definition of a conceptual frame for intercultural exchanges in Late Antiquity and of their place in the wider domain of cultural history, with a critical attitude towards the pros and cons of applying interpretative models elaborated in relation with modern or contemporary realities to Late Antiquity (e.g. the rise of nationalist movements, the concept of cultural hybridization, post-modern and post-colonial theories, theories about folklore and popular culture...).

3. Intercultural Encounters in Late Antique Historiography

The concluding section will try to map intercultural contacts in Late Antiquity on the basis of the direct testimonies of them in late antique historiographical texts:

- a. what do late antique historiographical sources allow us to know about the precise ways (where, when, thanks to whom?) in which cultural exchanges happened?
- b. How do late antique historians talk about the 'other' and the contacts with the 'other'? How do they describe the context and the protagonists of such contacts? How are cultural differences depicted, justified, and deployed in narrative?
- c. How do late antique historiographers assess intercultural exchange? What value do they attach to the cultural variety that we identify as typical of the later Roman world?

The outlined thematic division is not meant to be rigid, papers touching upon more than one of the mentioned points, or crossing the borders between the panels, will be gladly taken into account.