

Introduction

This special issue stems from a conference entitled ‘Beyond Eusebius and Augustine: Rethinking Christian Political Thought in Late Antiquity’, hosted at the University of Liverpool on 18 June 2019.¹ This conference brought together a range of speakers, with a particular focus on early career scholars, whose work seeks to develop new approaches to Christian political thought during this period.

The previous generation of research has transformed our understanding of the Christianization of the Roman world by interrogating what exactly it meant ‘on the ground’, examining how Christian ideas and practices were embedded in societies from Ireland to the Near East, and considering what this meant for the everyday lives of their inhabitants.² Yet as historians have rightly sought a richer and more inclusive social history of late ancient religious change, foregrounding the experiences of women, the poor, and attendees at specific, well-attested urban churches—and thus, the environs of the household, the basilica, and the city—the study of the state and political culture has been left behind.³ This is (of course) not to say that the perspectives of individual Christian writers on power and its representation have been absent from these new cultural and social histories; indeed, the papers presented at the conference and those included in this special issue show obvious debts to a wide array of superlative recent scholarship. But this work has rarely been included under the banner of ‘political thought’, and thus the wider implications of these sophisticated studies for how we might conceive of Christian ‘politics’ in late antiquity have yet to be fully appreciated. At the same time, recent synthetic accounts still tend to fall back on a narrow range of ecclesiastical authors (the likes of Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, Ambrose of Milan, and Augustine of Hippo), themes (e.g. the relationship between emperor and churchmen, conceptions of a Christian empire as a triumph or a fall) and early to mid-

¹ This conference was supported by the University of Liverpool Early Career Researchers Fund, the Liverpool Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and the Royal Historical Society Conference Fund. The conference also included presentations by Gerda Heydemann, Vincent Nicolini, and Melissa Moreira Melo Vieira, and a response by Averil Cameron. The work of editing the special issue was partly conducted in the context of an AHRC Early Career Leadership Fellowship (AH/T011521/1). We would like to thank the reader for their kind and helpful suggestions, and Andy Cain for his efficiency, generosity and, above all, flexibility in shepherding this special issue to publication despite the many complications which the COVID-19 pandemic posed for him, us, and our contributors.

² For an excellent recent survey of work on ‘Christianization’, see Maxwell 2012.

³ There are far too many superb studies from each of these perspectives to summarize here, but see esp. (on households and Christianization): Cooper 2007; Bowes 2008; Sessa 2012; on poverty and Christianization: Brown 2002; Magalhães de Oliveira 2012; Lopez 2013; on individual Christian communities: Maxwell 2006; Sandwell 2007; Bailey 2010; 2016; Rebillard 2012; Shepardson 2014.

twentieth century accounts.⁴ Even as work on late antiquity has proliferated and new texts, authors and contexts have received critical scrutiny, their ways of thinking about the intersection of Christianity and governance are still often captured through comparisons with this ‘canonical’ body of Christian thought, assembled at an earlier stage of historical engagement with this period.⁵ Such gestures can work to shut down interpretative possibilities, whether by presenting such discussions as a commonplace of late ancient Christian thought (and thus without obvious purchase on the actual practice of politics) or by narrowing what topics and people might have been seen by late ancient Christians as ‘political’. The result, as Anthony Kaldellis has suggested in a bracing reappraisal of the (supposedly) Eusebian ‘imperial idea’ in Byzantium, can be a static picture of an abstruse political theology divorced from the reality of governance.⁶ Kaldellis takes this as just cause to turn away from Christian political thought so as to emphasize more ‘secular’ modes of thinking about power; it could just as easily be seen as an invitation to revisit the question of what constituted distinctly Christian ways of thinking about politics and governance.

This special issue thus seeks to present new approaches to the Christian transformation of political culture, in dialogue with these wider trends in the social and cultural history of late antiquity. James Corke-Webster reconsiders the political arguments of the late third- and early fourth-century rhetorician and Christian apologist Lactantius. The transitory political moment of *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*—written after Constantine’s conversion, but under his colleague Licinius—has often proven awkward for linear accounts of the development of Christian political thought. Corke-Webster detaches *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* from late and post-Constantinian models of God and emperor to explore its engagement with, and subversion of, key themes in Tetrarchic ideology. By demonstrating the imperial persecutors’ discord and internecine rivalry, and their contempt for and abuse of their families, dependants, and subjects, Lactantius was able to suggest that a Christian emperor was necessarily a ‘better candidate for public office’ (000) on the terms of prevailing political discourse in the second decade of the fourth century—and, it might be suggested, for some time to come.

⁴ Esp. Baynes 1934; Dvornik 1966; Markus 1970.

⁵ See e.g. the complementary critiques of Van Nuffelen 2015, 326 n. 25 and Kaldellis 2015, 165-98 regarding the use of Eusebius. On recent work on Eusebius’ own complexities—‘no longer...an apologist for “caesaropapism”’: see Corke-Webster in this issue, quotation at 000.

⁶ Kaldellis 2015, esp. 170-72.

Julia Hillner, Máirín MacCarron and Ulriika Vihervalli provide a new methodological framework for the recurring problem of female political actors going unnamed in late ancient and early medieval Christian historical narratives. By exploring the naming strategies of Lactantius, Gregory of Tours and Bede, they both demonstrate and complicate the often cited role of female respectability in conditioning identifications of royal and imperial women. Hillner, MacCarron and Vihervalli show how Lactantius' naming patterns play with the politics of reputation: naming Tetrarchic women so as (once again) to undercut the persecuting emperors' political self-representation (which kept them private); not naming those persecutors' female victims to protect their honour; and taking cues from the actions of (current) emperors when introducing their spouses and female relatives. Hillner, MacCarron and Vihervalli highlight Gregory of Tours' non-naming of foreign and minor royal women (because they were deemed insignificant) and of individuals whose identities everyone could infer (because they should be reproached). Otherwise, Gregory's choices of when to name Merovingian queens show the same idiosyncratic disregard for genre norms as other aspects of his historical writing. By contrast, Hillner, MacCarron and Vihervalli note Bede's scrupulous concern to avoid naming living women, and especially those who belonged to the Northumbrian ruling dynasty to which he dedicated his history. From detailed analysis of these authors' rhetorical strategies, Hillner, MacCarron and Vihervalli show the awkward fit of contemporary feminist perspectives on namelessness-as-oppression for the understanding of the late ancient past, while demonstrating the continued urgency and necessity of the wider project of reclamation which those commitments have provoked.

Rebecca Usherwood considers the practice of *damnatio memoriae*, or 'memory sanctions', against Tetrarchic emperors by examining the epigraphic record of North Africa. Previous scholars have noted the selective and inconsistent erasure of the names of those regarded as persecutors of Christians, especially Diocletian, Maximian and Galerius, leading to suggestions that the inscriptions had been defaced by fanatical Christians. By surveying the extant evidence in detail, Usherwood demonstrates that the nature of many erasures, together with the practical difficulty of accessing some inscriptions in monumental settings, suggests that they could not have been carried out without the knowledge or approval of local officials. Rather than being clandestine acts of vandalism, these reshapings of the public memory of the emperors should be seen as engaging with a long tradition of such practices of imperial delegitimization, many of which would still be visible in the urban spaces of North Africa, without identifying these latest interventions as distinctly 'Christian'. For Usherwood,

the erasures were 'intentionally ambiguous, and therefore reflected a kind of common ground shared by various groups, who could view and interpret them in different ways but find agreement in what they saw' (000).

Meaghan McEvoy explores the hagiography of Daniel the Stylite, written in late fifth century Constantinople, and the important insights it provides into the politically turbulent world of east Roman politics. Unlike the first half of that century, when the Theodosian dynasty ruled virtually unchallenged, the second half was marked by a significant turnover in emperors, uncertainty over the succession, and attempted usurpations. This uncertainty brought with it a greater need for emperors such as Leo I and Zeno to seek religious legitimisation for their rule. And so, while the Theodosian emperors Arcadius and Theodosius II had remained largely aloof from aristocratic competition for ecclesiastical benefaction at Constantinople, the rulers of the late fifth century aggressively sought to win the approval of holy men such as Daniel, and in particular, to be his chief patron. Yet as McEvoy highlights, these emperors were competing alongside members of previous imperial dynasties for the holy man's blessing, as the identities of Daniel's most prominent named visitors testify. By highlighting the important supporters Daniel gained in his lifetime, the hagiographer aimed to appeal to a wide range of aristocratic patrons, and to secure future patronage for his monastery. Furthermore, McEvoy explores how the author of the *Life* depicts Daniel himself in an imperial light, surrounded by his own 'court' and bathed in ceremonial, to suggest that he was the holy equivalent of the emperor. Her paper reveals not only the way in which the volatile environment of the late fifth century shaped Christian politics by forcing emperors to engage in competition for ecclesiastical patronage to an unprecedented degree, but also how the author of the *Life of Daniel* shaped his portrayal of the stylite and the wider Christian political scene in his efforts to secure new benefactors.

Michael Wuk provides close analysis and contextualisation of the oath for the appointment of governors introduced by Justinian on 15 April 535 (*Novel 8*). Building on earlier fifth- and sixth-century investiture oaths, the statement required new governors to swear to fulfil their duties, avoid corruption, and uphold orthodoxy. Wuk demonstrates the studied neutrality of the doctrinal statements to which governors had publicly to declare their allegiance, giving both emperor and officials precious latitude in a period of intense division between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian ecclesiastical communities. Above all, Wuk emphasizes the significance of this oath as a performative act notwithstanding its practical effects (or lack

thereof) in curbing *suffragium* or heterodoxy. By requiring these statements from his governors, Justinian could signal his expectations of his subordinates within his ‘orthodox’ empire, while communicating his solicitude for the concerns of the provincial elites and bishops who represented some of his most important subjects.

Ryan Denson revisits one of the more arresting elements of Procopius of Caesarea’s *Secret History*: his depiction of Justinian and his consort Theodora as demons. While carefully skirting debates about whether or not Procopius ‘truly’ believed that (for example) the emperor appeared headless in the palace, Denson contends that such passages cannot simply be explained away as the literary metaphors of a skeptical historian and should instead be read within the context of wider conceptions of demonic behaviour. The ‘conceptual friction’ (000) between the various demonic guises of the imperial couple—Justinian as ‘Lord of the Demons’ versus Justinian as compelled to act by demons, Theodora as demon versus Theodora the sorcerer—suggests that Procopius included various rumours shaped by different interpretative frameworks which he chose not to harmonize. Denson shows how Procopius’ literary retelling of these stories fits with sixth-century understandings of demonic agency, eschatology and the Antichrist, including Oecumenius’ commentary on *Revelation*, and thus skillfully weaves ‘contemporary demonological and apocalyptic thought’ (000) into more familiar elements of political invective.

Conor O’Brien’s article uses the rich body of early political writings from Ireland to re-evaluate dominant scholarly approaches to the Christianization of political discourse in late antiquity. Recent engagement with wider scholarship on the period has led to reinterpretations of (what had once been seen as) ‘pagan’ survivals in contemporary texts, with the vernacular mirror-for-princes (*teocsa*) literature produced by lay legal experts (the *filid*) being recast as secular elements of a Christianizing Irish society. In a parallel maneuver O’Brien demonstrates the continuing complexities of what was defined as ‘Christian’ or ‘secular’ in seventh-century Latin Christian political discourse, when a ‘single text might incorporate multiple voices, each coming from a different place along [a] spectrum [of Christianization]’ (000). His paper reverses the direction of scholarly comparisons, showing how the Irish evidence might lead us to reconsider the assumption that religious neutrality was a ‘passing phase’ (000) in late antiquity, and investigate more closely the religious assumptions of ‘public notaries, lay scribes and secular administrators’ (000) in the post-Roman West.

The articles collected here are united by a concern to consider (in various senses) the ‘shaping’ of Christian politics as a dynamic process in late antiquity. In the first place, they seek to move on from unwieldy comparisons to canonical individuals and texts by considering how particular Christian authors and political actors sought actively to shape their own visions of how power was, could, or should be exercised across the late ancient Mediterranean and Europe. As several of these papers show, this was the case even when it came to longstanding issues like the distinction between the secular and the religious (O’Brien); the characterisation of religious authority in quasi-imperial ways (McEvoy); or the duties of representatives of the state to uphold orthodoxy (Wuk). Whether they wrote historical narratives, hagiographies, laws, or political treatises, these authors drew on shared aspects of contemporary political culture to present specific political actors, institutions, events and phenomena in particular ways. Individual authors thus carefully crafted and (re)shaped even what might seem like straightforward or stereotypical recourses—like the denunciation of an emperor as a persecutor (Corke-Webster) or the Antichrist (Denson)—to make particular cases or suit specific circumstances. These papers also seek to pursue themes beyond those captured in traditional institutional histories of ‘church’ and ‘state’: norms of masculinity and the elite household (Corke-Webster); demonology (Denson); oaths (Wuk); memory sanctions and epigraphic erasures (Usherwood); and the naming or non-naming of powerful women (Hillner, MacCarron and Vihervalli). In place of abstract theorizing, these papers consider surviving texts as traces of the ideas and frameworks which contemporaries sought to apply to the real-life practice of governance within their own societies. They seek to reconstruct the specific political configurations, social interactions, and institutional cultures which can be inferred from these texts and artefacts: whether it is the deliberations of town councils in fourth-century North African cities (Usherwood), the cultural assumptions of Irish legal experts (O’Brien), or the forms of competition practiced by Constantinopolitan aristocratic dynasties and the holy people who sought their patronage (McEvoy). Above all, they consider how these late ancient authors and political actors drew on, engaged with, and sought to shape perceptions of the actual exercise of power.

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