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When Did Late Antiquity Come to an End for the Eastern Christian Churches? Some Considerations

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Introduction

Throughout his professional career Christoph Houswitschka dealt with questions related to the Middle Ages. His areas of interest also included studies in the reception and transmission of Late Antique and Mediaeval motives or characters, as it is evident, for example, from the conference on the literary and cinematic reception and transformation of the mediaeval and late antique characters of the saviour and healer, which he organised in Bamberg in June 2005, together with Dina de Rentiis. Consequently, it seems fitting for a memorial volume for such an esteemed scholar as Christoph Houswitschka to focus on the reception process between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. In particular, it is the aim of this paper to contribute to the much-discussed question of the transition from the world of Classical Antiquity to that of the Middle Ages – with a special emphasis on the Eastern Christian Churches. This contribution, therefore, first describes the recent state of research (Cameron ix). It then tells the origins of the Eastern Christian Churches and argues why the age of the (Eastern) Roman Emperor Justinian (527-565) and the Rise of Islam (after 622) mark deep turning points in their early history. Finally, this essay presents a concluding perspective regarding the transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages for the Eastern Christian Churches.

1. The Transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages: The Current State of Research

For a long time, for historians the transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages was marked by certain caesuras, as for the example by the end of the Western line of Roman Emperors in the year 476 (Meier, "Ostrom-Byzanz" 187-91). However, with his suggestion to understand the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages as a longer lasting process, during which the world of Antiquity was transformed into that of the Middle Ages, Irish historian Peter Brown introduced a new approach to the discussion in the early 1970s. In the introduction to his book *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750*, he writes:

> This book is a study of social and cultural change. I hope that the reader will put it down with some idea of how, and even of why, the Late Antiquity world (in the period from about AD 200 to about 700) came to differ from "classical" civilization, and of how the headlong changes of this period, in turn, determined the varying evolution of Western Europe, of Eastern Europe and the Near East. (Brown 7)

Since the publication of Brown's study, different aspects of longer lasting changes of "classical" institutions or self-identities have been studied in closer detail – for example the aftermath of the Roman-Persian wars in the sixth and seventh centuries, the decline of urbanism in the Roman East in the seventh century, or the religious and political circumstances in which Islam developed (Cameron xi).

Since the publication of Peter Brown's book, historians have either followed his fundamental approach and spoken in translation of a "longer-lasting late antiquity" (Meier, "Ostrom-Byzanz" 195-96; Cameron xi), or they have remained sceptical and still favour fixed caesuras – as, for example, the British historians Peter Heather and Bryan Ward-Perkins. Their focus lies on the Western areas of the Roman Empire where, in their eyes, certain historical processes gained the character of decisive caesuras. Bryan Ward-Perkins, for example, points to the destruction of the classical civilization that the Germanic invasions brought to the Western regions of the Roman Empire (Ward-Perkins 10). Peter Heather explains that "the fall of Rome, and with it the western half of the Empire, constitutes one of the formative revolutions of European history, and has traditionally been seen as heralding the end of the ancient world" (xi).

With respect to the Eastern regions, Mischa Meier, in contrast, proposes a sort of combination of both the fundamental approaches of caesuras and transmission by focussing on what a Tübingen research centre calls the "threatened orders". According to this model, the transition from Late Antiquity to the Mediaeval Byzantine Empire in the Roman East occurred in three steps: in the fifth century the institution of the Roman Emperor itself was threatened. During the reign of Emperor Justinian (527-565) the self-identity of the people of Constantinople was challenged by military and natural disasters; and during the reign of Emperor Heraclius (610-641) the loss of the Eastern provinces to the Muslim Arabs transformed the (Eastern) Roman Empire into the Byzantine Empire (Meier, "Ostrom-Byzanz" 205).

In recent years, new perspectives on the transition process have contributed to the ongoing academic discussion. With respect to *geography*, for instance, the Austrian Byzantinist Johannes Preiser-Kapeller integrated the Sasanian Empire into his descriptive account of Late Antiquity, published in 2018, and depicted connecting lines within the "Eurasian-African region" (Preiser-Kapeller 10). Likewise, Mischa Meier's *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung* broadens its horizon beyond the Eastern and the Western regions of the Mediterranean world by including neighbouring areas such as the Persian Empire.[1]

[1] "Vor allem aber sollte dadurch, dass ab etwa 500 nur noch der ehemalige Osten und der Westen des *Imperium Romanum* als Großräume thematisiert wurden, eine bisher vernachlässigte Zäsur . . . herausgearbeitet werden, an der eine einheitliche 'Reichsgeschichte' in eine multipolare Verflechtungsgeschichte übergehen muss. Mit diesem Vorgehen sollte

Moreover, in relation to *religious processes*, the Qur'ān in interreligious-discursive studies is understood more and more as a text belonging to Late Antiquity with numerous entanglements and interrelations to theological traditions of pre-Islamic Arabic religion and poetry, Rabbinic Judaism, and Eastern (Greek and Syriac) Christianity (Neuwirth 107; Reynolds 35-36; Griffith 214; Stroumsa 1-20). For example, the US theologian Gabriel Reynolds describes the reception and transformation of Biblical stories, motifs, or persons in the Qur'ān as an "allusion" to Biblical narratives which the Qur'ān processed according to its own religious messages (Reynolds 36). Because of this entangling and intermingling with Late Antique religious traditions, the Berlin professor for Oriental Studies Angelika Neuwirth calls the Qur'ān in my translation a "work of Late Antiquity" ("ein Werk der Spätantike;" Neuwirth 107).

It is against this historical background that a Synod of Constantinople (536), summoned by the (East) Roman Emperor Justinian († 565), and the Rise of Islam (after 622) mark deep turning points with long-lasting effects for Christian Churches both within and outside the (Eastern) Roman Empire.

2. The Transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages for Eastern Christian Churches

2.1 The Emergence of the Eastern Christian Churches

Although Christianity is a religion which originated in the Near East, today it is often seen as a Western religion due to its present spread in Europe, the Americas, or Africa (for an overview of the present situation of the Eastern Christian Churches, see Oeldemann 65-144). Therefore, the Protestant theologian Karl Pinggéra recalls to our attention that the Eastern Christian Churches are no result of missionary efforts in modern time but have continued to exist from the early beginnings of Christianity to the present day (Pinggéra and Lange, "Einleitung" ix).

These Eastern Christian Churches, which are an expression of such a continuation from Antiquity to the present day (Hage 17), can be divided into two groups with respect to their geographical extension in Late Antiquity. There are these churches whose beginnings lie within the boundaries of the Roman Empire, and there are those churches which originated outside of Rome's domination.

nicht zuletzt auch innerhalb der Diskussion um die Konzeptualisierung der Spätantike als Phase der Transformation oder der Zäsuren und Brüche, die inzwischen die Forschung polarisieren, ein alternativer Weg vorgestellt warden" (Meier, *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung* 1090-91).

2.1.1 Eastern Christian Churches Within the Roman Empire

As for the Churches within the Roman Empire, they are primarily represented today by the Churches and Ecclesiastical Communities within the Latin tradition of Christianity and the Orthodox Churches of the Byzantine tradition.[2] In the Near East, these are the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchates of Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria (Oeldemann 84-92; Winkler, "Die orthodoxen Kirchen im Orient" 23-32). In contrast, Latin hierarchies in the area were established only during the time of the Crusades (eleventh to thirteenth centuries; Hage 56-58) or in the nineteenth to twenty first centuries – as for the example the Latin Patriarchate of the Holy City, which the Roman Pope Pius IX († 1878) canonically re-erected in the year 1847 (Hage 60-61).

However, ecclesiastical unity within the Church of the Roman Empire, as it was established by the Roman Emperor Constantine I († 337) in the fourth century,[3] was lost during the sixth century. This was due to the differing reception of the "Ecumenical", i.e. Roman,[4] Council of Chalcedon (451) to which the Roman Emperor Marcianus († 457) summoned the bishops of the Roman Empire (recent description in Gemeinhardt 293-299). While the Latin traditions and the Orthodox Churches of the Byzantine tradition received and still hold the Council as dogmatically binding, many Christians in Syria and Egypt did not accept the Christological Formula of the Council, according to which the Christ existed in two "natures" (*en dyo physesin*) but one "person" and "hypostasis" (*kai eis hen prosōpon kai mian hypostasin*) after the incarnation of the God-Logos.[5] These Christians were only prepared to accept the Council of Chalcedon (451) as a synod

[2] The divisions within the Latin tradition of Christianity occurred during the so-called "Reformation" in the sixteenth century (with regard to Protestant Communities) or in the year 1724 when the canons of the Church of Utrecht elected a bishop without asking for Rome's permission (referring to the Old Catholic = "altkatholische" Church. Therefore, in Late Antiquity there was just a single Latin tradition with local centres such as Rome, Carthage, Mediolanum, Lugdunum, or Spain.

[3] Constantine identified the "Catholic Church" with the church of the Roman Empire, as is clear from the anathemata of the first "Ecumenical" (i.e. Roman) Council of Nicaea (325): "Those who say . . . are anathematized from the catholic and apostolic church (toutous anathematizei hē katholikē kai apostolikē ekklēsia)". For the Christian penetration of ancient society within the Roman Empire during the fourth century, see Gemeinhardt 181.

[4] The term "ecumenical" means "world-wide". See Chadwick 134-35. Athanasius of Alexandria used the term "ecumenical" to explain the special value of the Council of Nicaea (325), given that all the bishops of the oikumene attended the synod (dia touto gar kai oikumenikē gegonen hē en Nikaia synodos) – in contrast to "local" synods (hina mēketi kata meros prophasei pisteōs ginōntai). See von Stockhausen chapter 2.1.

[5] The Christological formula of the Council defines: "Following our holy fathers we teach it to confess that the Christ exists . . . in two natures (*en dyo physesin*) . . . but one person and hypostasis (*kai eis hen prosōpon kai mian hypostasin*)" (Wohlmuth 86). For a discussion of the Christological content of the formula see Grillmeier 751-75.

which had condemned Eutyches of Constantinople († 456) and his doctrine of Monophysitism.[6]

In the first 85 years which followed the Synod of Chalcedon (451), the (Eastern) Roman Emperors at Constantinople sought to find a compromise between the two rivalling parties in order to preserve the unity of the Church of the Empire (Lange, *Mia Energeia* 143-364). Following an intervention of the Roman Pope Agapetus († 535) (Lange, *Mia Energeia* 348-54; Brimioulle 126-93), however, Emperor Justinian deposed the anti-Chalcedonian Patriarchs of Antioch, Severus († 538), and Alexandria, Theodosius († 566), together with Anthimus of Constantinople (year of death unknown), after a Synod at Constantinople (536). Justinian replaced them by Pro-Chalcedonian successors (Evagrius Scholasticus FC 57/2, IV,11). Volker Menze, therefore, calls the Synod of Constantinople (536) the "turning point" in the establishment of the Syrian Orthodox Church, given that the deposed anti-Chalcedonian patriarchs and bishops began to ordain not only priests and deacons, as they had done up until the synod of 536, but also bishops, so that a rivalling Christian clergy was created (Menze, "The Establishment of the Syriac Churches" 105-18, esp. 114). Because of these ordinations, two Christian churches came into being beside the Imperial Church: the West-Syrian or Syrian-Orthodox Church in Syria, and the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt (Winkler, *Koptische Kirche und Reichskirche* 153; Menze, "The Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church" 105). Despite temporary unions with the Imperial Church during the reign of Emperor Heraclius (610-41) (Lange, *Mia Energeia* 531-616), the ecclesiastical hierarchical split following the deposition of the anti-Chalcedonian patriarchs after the Synod of Constantinople (536) has not been healed up to the present day. In that respect, the time of the (Eastern) Roman Emperor Justinian (527-565), indeed, marks a deep turning point in the history of the Eastern Christian Churches, even though these churches still belonged to the Late Antique world and its cultures.

2.1.2 The Eastern Christian Churches Outside the Roman Empire

The history of the Eastern Christian Churches outside the Roman Empire in Africa south of Egypt, Armenia, and Mesopotamia differs from that of the Churches within its boundaries – even though the Christian Churches remained connected with each other (Hage 200-313). Whereas, for example, Christianity arose in the Roman Empire, the first Christian communities outside the Imperium

[6] During a religious conference in Constantinople 532, summoned by Emperor Justinian, the Syriac speaking opponents of the Council of Chalcedon (451) were ready to anathematise Eutyches, see Brock, "The Conversations with the Syrian Orthodox" XIII (94). As for the Coptic Church, Patriarch Timothy Aelurus († 477) excluded two supporters of Eutyches from the Egyptian Church (Ebeid and Wickham 321-69, esp. 338-41; see also Lange, *Mia Energeia* 148).

Romanum were founded by missionaries who brought the Christian faith to these areas from within Roman-ruled regions.[7] In the case of the Church in the Persian Empire, it is generally assumed that it was merchants, prisoners of war, or itinerant preachers who travelled along the main trade routes from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea to the East, probably first approaching Jews who represented a recognisable minority in Mesopotamia since the time of the "Babylonian Exile (597-39 BC)" (Taylor 68-87; Winkler, "Zeitalter der Sassaniden" 13-42). Christian tradition regards the apostle Thomas as main Christian Missionary of the East (17). Already in the third century, the *Acts of Thomas,* possibly written in Edessa, describe how Parthia was assigned to the Apostle Thomas by a lottery among the Apostles (*Acts of Thomas* 17). Origen of Alexandria († 253/254) tells the same narrative in his *Commentarii in Genesim* (91a). In the fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea († 339) adds that Thomas the Apostle had sent Thaddaeus/Addai, one of the "Twelve" (Mark 3:18), as Christian Missionary to King Abgar of Edessa when the city's ruler asked Jesus to come in person to Edessa to heal him of sickness (Eusebius Caesariensis I 13,2,1-4). Besides these literary traditions regarding an Apostolic origin of the Church in Persia, archaeological evidence points to Christian tombs on the island of Kharg in the third century (Winkler, "Zeitalter der Sassaniden" 13-14). Around the same time Philippus, a disciple of the philosopher Bardesanes of Edessa († 222), knows of Christians in Persia and Media (*The Book of the Laws of the Countries* 61). As a consequence, the Church in the Persian Empire claims an Apostolic origin, just as the Imperial Church in the Roman Empire does. Whereas, however, the unity of the Imperial Church was lost in the sixth century, the Church of the East was able to keep its unity up until the sixteenth century when some of its Bishops entered into a union with the Apostolic See of Rome and the Catholic Chaldean Church emerged.[8]

While Christianity reached Persia by way of missionaries from the Roman Empire, it was, in contrast, according to the Armenian historian Agathangelus (possibly second half of the fifth century), the initiative of the Armenian King Tiridates III († c.317) who is responsible for the spread of the Christian faith to Armenia. For Agathangelus testifies that King Tiridates asked from Bishop Leontius of the Roman City of Caesarea in Cappadocia that an Armenian noble called Gregorius may be consecrated Bishop for Armenia (Agathangelus 796-806). Back in Armenia, this Gregorius, who was awarded the honorary title of "Illuminator"

[7] In his response to the pagan philosopher Celsus, Origenes of Alexandria underlines the fact that all peoples who were united in the Roman Empire favoured the rapid spread of early Christianity (*Origenes Alexandrinus* FC 50/2, II, 30).

[8] It was the East Syrian abbot of the monastery of Rhabban Hormizd, Johannes Sulaqa († 1569), who sought an ecclesiastical union with the Apostolic See of Rome and was ordained patriarch in Rome by Pope Julius III († 1555) in the year 1552, see Baum 101; Oeldemann 118.

(*lusaworitsch*), is said to have baptised the Armenian King in the year 301, although the exact date of this event is uncertain (for a discussion see Hage 230). Because of this early date of the king's conversion to Christianity, C. Detlef Müller calls Armenia in my translation "the first official Christian state" (Müller 354).

Just like in Armenia, the extension of Christianity to Aksum in North-Eastern Africa is related to a King – in this case to Ezana of Aksum († c.370) (Pinggéra, "Die Äthiopisch-Orthodoxe Kirche" 41). While in Armenia a local nobleman was sent to a representative of the Church of the Roman Empire, in Aksum it was a man from the Roman city of Tyrus called Frumentius († 383) who, together with his brother Edesius (year of death not known), came to Aksum as a slave due to a shipwreck (Rufinus X,9). As teacher of the future king Ezana, Frumentius was allowed to go to Alexandria where he was ordained Bishop for Ethiopia by Pope Athanasius of Alexandria († 373) (*tum vero Athanasius . . . tradito ei sacerdotio, redire eum cum domini gratia, unde venerat, iubet*, Rufinus X,10), perhaps in the years 340 to 356 (Pinggéra, "Die Äthiopisch-Orthodoxe Kirche" 42; Hage 203). After his return to Aksum, Frumentius baptised Ezana as the first Christian king – a conversion that is well attested in inscriptions and coinage (Hage 203). According to Wolfgang Hage, Aksum, thus, became the third Christian country after Armenia and the promotion of Christianity in the Imperium Romanum by Constantine I (203).

These connections with Christianity within the Roman Empire, however, underline that the Eastern Christian Churches belonged to the classical world of (Late) Antiquity. In Armenia, it was up to the time of King Pap(as) († 374) that the Armenian Catholicos was consecrated in the Roman City of Caesarea in Cappadocia (231). In Ethiopia it was even until 1959 when the Alexandrian Pope Shenuta III († 2012) granted to the Church of Ethiopia the right to elect its own patriarch that the Ethiopian Church was dependent on Alexandria (215).

2.2 Language and Literature of the Eastern Christian Churches

While in the churches within the Roman Empire Greek and Latin were the dominant languages of councils, letters, liturgy, or canon law,[9] the Eastern Christian Churches have preserved their ancient traditions in other languages. The variety of their rites includes Semitic languages (such as Ethiopic or Syriac), Afro-Asian languages (such as Coptic), or Indo-European languages (such as Armenian) (Pinggéra and Lange, "Einleitung" xiii). In order to underline the importance of

[9] This general observation shall not minimise the importance of other languages spoken in the Roman Empire. For example, Irenaeus of Lugdunum († 200), who was a Greek-speaking clergyman from Asia Minor, noted that he had to learn the Gallic language in order to fulfil his duties as bishop of Lugdunum in southern Gaul (Brox I Praef.). For the challenge which other languages than Greek and Latin represented to early Christian mission see Brox 232-37.

the Eastern Christian languages, Sebastian Brock stresses that the rich literature that was composed in the Syriac language can be understood as a "third component" of early Christianity besides Greek and Latin (Brock, "Zum Geleit" 7). Not only is it likely that Jesus himself and his disciples spoke a dialect of Aramaic, but Syriac-speaking Christians also composed their poetry, their historical writings, or their theological tractates from the second to the thirteenth centuries in Syriac. Syriac literature even reached its peak not in the classical world, but in the eleventh to thirteenth century under Muslim domination during the so called "Syriac Renaissance" (7-8).

While the first Christians in Mesopotamia, thus, could rely on Syriac, an Armenian alphabet was introduced, according to the Armenian historian Koriun (Koriun, § 33-42), by Mesrop Maschtotz († 440) in the first half of the fifth century – a time when the Persian shahs brought independent Armenian kingship in 428 to an end and sought to integrate Armenia closer into the Persian Empire (Pinggéra, "Armenisch-Apostolische Kirche" 53). Based on Mesrop's script, the Armenian language, literature, and culture strengthened the unity of the Armenian people during times in which no Armenian "state" existed (54).

Likewise, the Semitic language of Ge'ez, which might have reached the region of modern Ethiopia and Eritrea in the first to second centuries, is still used in liturgy by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, whereas modern dialects like Amharic are spoken by the people in everyday life (Pinggéra, "Die Äthiopische Kirche" 41).

It is an expression of respect for the Eastern Christian traditions that the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church (1962-1965) noted that the Eastern Churches in their liturgical life preserved a rich treasure from which the Western traditions of Christianity greatly benefited (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 14,1). Liturgy celebrated in a different language than Greek or Latin is, therefore, not an expression of a separation from the Classical World by the Eastern Christian Churches, but rather a sign of the plurality of ancient Christianity in the (Late) Antique World.

2.3 The Reception of Synods in the Eastern Christian Churches

Another field of connection with the Church of the Roman Empire was the involvement of the Eastern Christian churches in the theological discussions which destroyed the Unity of the Church of the Roman Empire. In particular, it was the reception of dogmatic constitutions composed at councils or synods taking place in the Roman Empire that were either received or rejected by the Eastern Christian Churches. Considering that it was the Roman Emperor who called the bishops of his Empire to "Ecumenical" councils, it is important to emphasise that there was no general need for the Christian Churches outside the Imperium to

receive the decisions of these Councils (Brock, "Christology of the Church of the East" 129-30). If Churches outside the Roman Empire accepted the doctrinal or juridical determinations of Councils of the Roman Imperial Church, then they did so out of their free will. This was the case, for example, when the Armenian Catholicos Aristakes († 333), a son of Gregorius Illuminator, attended the Council of Nicaea (325), according to Moses of Choren (Moses of Choren 90). Therefore, the Armenian Church accepted the creed of the synod of the Roman Church and sided with the Imperial Church (Winkler, "Zur 'Rezeption' Ökumenischer Konzilien" 629-31).

Like the Armenian Church, the Church of the East in the Persian Empire accepted the creed of the Council of Nicaea (325) at a synod which took place in Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410, benevolently accompanied by the Persian Shah Jazdgird I († 421). However, it did not accept the Greek Creed in the way of a literal translation, but rather in a Syriac revision of its theological content. (Winkler, "Zeitalter der Sassaniden" 21; Winkler, "Zur 'Rezeption' Ökumenischer Konzilien" 623-29). Therefore, Western theological vocabulary which characterises the Churches outside of the Roman Empire as "Pre-Ephesian" or "Pre-Chalcedonian" seems unjustified, given that these labels assume that the Christian churches outside the Imperium Romanum would have been obliged to consent to "Ecumenical" Councils of the Roman Imperial Church; and if they did not do so, then they must be regarded as either "Pre-Ephesian" or "Pre-Chalcedonian" (Winkler, "Ostsyrisches Christentum" 12-13). Therefore, Eastern Christian Churches outside the Roman Empire which did not accept a synod of the Church of the Empire did not separate themselves from the classical world. Rather the other way around, the Church of the East in the Persian Empire understood itself as fifth patriarchate of the single "Catholic" Church besides the four "Western" patriarchates of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioch even in the sixth century (Canon 29, Chabot 160). The explanation for this self-identification is to be found in the fact that the Church of the East did not accept the Roman Council of Chalcedon (451) which elevated Jerusalem to patriarchate in the Roman Imperial Church (Winkler, "Ostsyrisches Christentum" 40). Therefore, there was a felt gap which allowed the Church of the East to declare the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon the fifth patriarch of the universal, the "Catholic" Christian Church.

2.4 Interim Conclusion

My remarks on the emergence, literary tradition, and theological relationship of synods of the Church of the Roman Empire show that Christianity in the fifth to seventh centuries is adequately described as "polyphonic" or "plural" (Gemeinhardt 7). Following the Synod of Constantinople (536) within the Imperium Romanum, there existed the anti-Chalcedonian West-Syrian and the Coptic

Churches besides the pro-Chalcedonian Imperial Church. Outside the Imperium, there were the Church of the East and the Armenian Church in the Persian Empire which resembled a minority in a predominantly Zoroastrian state. Finally, there was the church in North-Eastern Africa South of Egypt depending on the Patriarch of Alexandria who ordained its bishop up until the twentieth century. All of these churches had their own literary language, their own theological tradition, and their own liturgy. Despite this variety, they belonged to the world of Late Antiquity.

When, however, was this world transformed into that of the Middle Ages?

2.5 The Transition to the Middle Ages for the Eastern Christian Churches

In his study *Die Spätantike* (2014), Rene Pfeilschifter argues that the transition from the world of Antiquity to that of the Middle Ages happened when Christianity could not be passed on to the conquering Arabs in the seventh century, whereas in the Latin West Christianity reached the Germanic tribes which established their own kingdoms in the former Western regions of the Roman Empire from the fifth century (Pfeilschifter 17). Following the loss of the Eastern provinces of the (Eastern) Roman Empire in Syria, Palestine, or Egypt, what remained of the (Eastern) Roman Empire was different to the state prior to the Arab invasions. Various institutions had disappeared, others had emerged anew. The inhabitants of Constantinople did no longer know the past of their own city so that travel guides had to be composed in order to explain to them their own past (14). And their rulers were no longer called *imperator* in the Latin tradition of the Roman emperors since Augustus († 14 AD), but referred to with the Greek word *basileus* – a term which designated biblical kings such as David (265). Therefore, at the end of the seventh century, so Pfeilschifter says, the (Eastern) Roman Empire was, in my translation, a "transformed state" ("ein verwandeltes Staatswesen"; 14).

Pfeilschifter's conclusions seem convincing when looking at the (Eastern) Roman Empire. Considering, however, the different historical development in the Latin-speaking West of the Mediterranean Sea, Peter Gemeinhardt suggested to differentiate between the historical processes in both regions (Gemeinhardt 6). Whereas, according to his analysis, in the West deep cuts in theology, art and science accompanied the disintegration of the Roman Empire, in the East they continued up to the seventh century (6). Consequently, Gemeinhardt included the Christian reaction to the rise of Islam into his historical account of Christianity in Late Antiquity, accepting the arguments provided by Pfeilschifter or Neuwirth (6). Therefore, he understands the period from the second to the seventh

centuries as a continuum which he calls "Late Antiquity" because of its continuities in culture and belief despite regional upheavals in politics, society, and religion (6).

Indeed, with reference to the Eastern regions, the rise of Islam changed the conditions of life for the Eastern Christian Churches fundamentally (Gemeinhardt, 380-89; Lange, "Dogmengeschichtliche Orientierung" 16-19; Hage 42-50; Tropeau 392-97). In the centuries after the Arab conquests, all the Eastern Christian Churches melted down to weaker or stronger minorities within the "House of Islam" (Tropeau 399-472). In principle, Christians, as "people of the book" (*ahl al-kitāb*), were allowed to live their lives according to their faith, but in fact they had to accept certain restrictions due to their religion – for example, a conversion from Islam to Christianity was strictly forbidden, and children in interreligious marriages had to become Muslims (Hage 49). Moreover, Christians, as *dhimmis*, as people in need of the protection of the (Muslim) ruler, had to pay a special tax (*dschizya*) – except for women, children, or monks (Hage 47; Tropeau 393-94). Christians were not permitted to bear weapons. They were instructed to dress differently from Muslims (Hage 47). And they were not allowed either to build new churches or to repair damaged church buildings (Hage 47; Tropeau 394-96). For any care of ecclesiastical buildings Christians had to seek permission from the Muslim rulers. Therefore, Gerard Tropeau concluded that the Christians exhausted themselves in this wear and tear with the Muslim authorities (Tropeau 395-96).

The new rules that were established by the new rulers applied to members of all Eastern Churches within the House of Islam (Hage 45). Whereas, however, this situation was nothing new for the Church of the East or the Armenian Church, which had always been religious minorities in the Persian Empire, it was especially the pro-Chalcedonian communities of the Roman Imperial Church that had to deal with a political reversal unknown to them so far. The same counts for the anti-Chalcedonian Churches in the former Eastern Provinces of the Roman Empire which had had to face persecutions by the (Eastern) Roman Emperors (45). Therefore, Wolfgang Hage underlines that these Churches were, now under Muslim domination, in a position to reestablish an official liturgical life which they had not been able to enjoy under (Eastern) Roman pressure (136). In that sense, the situation for the Eastern Christian Churches differed significantly.

These differences can, likewise, be observed in other fields. Whereas, for example, both the West and the East Syrian Churches enjoyed a new literary blossoming in Syriac, pro-Chalcedonian theologians such as Theodorus Abū Qurrah († 825) soon started to compose their writings in Arabic, in which the other Eastern Christian Churches followed them (Winkler, "Orthodoxe Kirchen im Orient"

27; Tropeau 406-07). Pro-Chalcedonian circles in Antioch, which was reconquered for about a century by the (Eastern) Roman forces in 969, translated Greek patristic texts into Arabic (Tropeau 407).[10] In Bagdad, founded in 762 as new residence of the Abbasid khalifs, it was East Syrian scholars like Hunayn ibn Ishaq († 873) who, together with their West Syrian and pro-Chalcedonian Melkite counterparts, translated Greek philosophical texts such as those of Aristotle or medical writings like those of Galenus of Pergamon († 216) from Greek into Syriac and from Syriac into Arabic (Pinggéra, "Apostolische Kirche des Ostens" 27). A new type of Syriac literature emerged that mostly took the form of fictional dialogues between a Christian bishop or monk and a Muslim representative (Griffith 251-73). The Church of the East succeeded in bringing Christianity all the way along the silk road to India and China, where the Sian-fu tablet, a stele with a Syriac heading and a Chinese inscription dating from 781, attests that an East Syrian monk called Alopen – and with him Christianity – had reached China around 635 (Pinggéra, "Apostolische Kirche des Ostens" 30). Moreover, West Syriac writers such as Michael Syrus († 1199) or Gregorius Barhebraeus († 1286) contributed to the "Syriac Renaissance" (Pinggéra, "Kirchen der syrisch-orthodoxen Tradition" 81-84).

As for Egypt, the change in the relation between the pro-Chalcedonian Patriarch and his Coptic rival was made manifest when the Muslim conqueror of Egypt, 'Amr ibn al-'As († 664) allowed the anti-Chalcedonian Coptic Patriarch Benjamin I († c.665) to return to Alexandria where he was welcomed by many inhabitants (Hage 172). In the centuries after the Arab invasion, the Coptic Church benefited from the Fatimid khalifs in their new residence Cairo (since 973). These, belonging to a Shiite minority among a Sunni majority, sought support from other minorities like the Christians, who could reach high administrative offices (174).

Moreover, the arrival of the Muslims changed the situation for the Armenian Church as well (240-41). Armenian local rulers were able to gain a certain independence from the khalif in the ninth century so that an ecclesiastical life could revive (240). This revival came to an end when the (Eastern) Roman armies conquered the region in the eleventh century, for the pro-Chalcedonian Emperors sought to reintegrate the Armenian Church into the Imperial Church (240).

Finally, in Ethiopia the situation was different, given that a decline of the kingdom of Aksum set in which lasted a few centuries (Pinggéra, "Äthiopisch-Orthodoxe

[10] The attraction to the Arabic language and culture in the pro-Chalcedonian patriarchate of Antioch was made manifest in 1724, when a part of the Greek-Orthodox Church of Antioch concluded a union with the Apostolic See of Rome (Hage 90). While the Greek-Melkite Catholic Church, which was the outcome of the union, still used Greek in its liturgy, the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate stressed its Arabic roots. Consequently, Wolfgang Hage speaks of the "Rum-Orthodox" Church of Antioch (90-95).

Kirche" 43). It is not before the twelfth century that sources speak of a new Christian dynasty at Roha which stressed its Jewish heritage and is called "the Salomonic dynasty" (43). The self-identity of this dynasty still shapes the anti-Chalcedonian Ethiopic Orthodox Church until today (43).

However, all these developments differed from those of Late Antiquity in one decisive point: the Christian churches in the Near East – with the exception of the Ethiopic Church in Africa – did no longer have to deal with neither the (Eastern) Roman Emperor in Constantinople nor the Persian Shah in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, but with Muslim khalifs in either Bagdad or Cairo. In this sense, the transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages began with the rise of Islam which initiated a process of transformation in which the situation of the Eastern Christian Churches developed a new face, which we, then, at some point in time can call the "Middle Ages".

3. Perspective Conclusion

This paper has shown that recent historical studies prefer not to tie the transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages to a fixed, generally valid point in time, but to look at the developments in the different regions around the Mediterranean Sea in a differentiated way. Whereas in the Latin-speaking West the establishment of Germanic kingdoms brought with it changes in the political, social, and religious life, in the East the Rise of Islam led to new living conditions for Christians and their Churches. The same accounts for the Eastern Christian Churches. Even though pro-Chalcedonian communities did not enjoy the support of the Emperor in Constantinople any longer, the anti-Chalcedonian Churches flourished and expanded along the Silk Road to India, Tibet, and China – even though they melted down to minorities in the House of Islam. Just as for the Eastern Roman Empire, so, likewise, the establishment of Muslim rule marks the beginning of the transition from the world of Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, which was reached at some time when Christians realised that the Muslim domination was to last for longer when they adapted to a new political system rather different from that of Late Antiquity, when they got used to a new language (Arabic) in everyday life and to a different culture, and when they settled within these new surroundings. The author hopes that Christoph Houswitschka would have been happy with this description of the transformation of Antique characters, motives, and *topoi* with respect to the Eastern Christian Churches within and without the Roman Empire.

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