

Research Proposal

‘The authority of consensus in Late Antiquity: narratives of popular, senatorial and synodical unanimity’

Abstract

The proposed research addresses the late-antique narrative resources used to present consensual and unanimous actions in processes of institutionalisation and individualisation in religious contexts, and the changes in the interpretation of the texts during their reception and transmission. My project aims to examine their sociohistorical framework and political function, especially in processes of institutionalisations of the past and of religious or political groups. The focus falls on fifth-century Greek sources which inaugurate the redaction and compilation of proceedings and codes as known in Roman Law and Christian Conciliar Studies. The project also follows the changes in the material and social ideas about codifications and compilations. It engages with theories on Christian and Roman identities, and their development and influence. For example, the seemingly similar proceedings of Christian synods and decision-making sessions of civil institutions in the Roman Empire and their cultural and historical significance will be analysed. Expanding previous work, in part pursued in conjunction with the Kolleg-Forschergruppe “Religiöse Individualisierung in historischer Perspektive” (KFG) at the Max-Weber-Kolleg (MWK) during a three-months junior fellowship in 2015-16, the project advances the thesis that the written representations of unanimity and consensus are primarily literary creations which contributed tokens of authority to the discourse for which they were composed.

I. Introduction

The proposed research addresses the communicative strategies found in late-antique texts presenting consensual and unanimous gestures and actions. It engages with theories on Christian and Roman identities, their development and their influence. For example, it analyses the seeming similarity between their decision-making proceedings. The project advances the thesis that the written representations of unanimity and consensus do not have the descriptive and ordering character of modern history and should not be read too literally nor regarded as factual and reliable witnesses of the actions. It will point to nuanced interpretations of statements of collectivity which show diverse individualising conceptions of religious participation and perception. The research contributes to interdisciplinary reflection on the constitution of contemporary institutions, religions and cultures, inviting scientific discussion of the importance and necessity of consensus and collective discourses. The social and religious implications of the proposed engagement with the reliability of texts traditionally used to formulate institutional authority can be combined with natural and social sciences in identifying rituals, mechanisms and meanings of social gatherings, cultural traits and movements, and place them in their historical context. The authorial voice and its use of social, cultural and religious identifiers or collective nouns will be analysed considering the balance of attachment and flexibility with which individuals lived out the religious, cultural and linguistic realities to which they belonged or with which they had contact. The focus will be on decision-making processes of the representative bodies with which the construction of institutionalised Roman and Christian identities in Late Antiquity associated greatest authority, namely the Roman Senate and Christian synods. It will be structured around the analysis of some well documented narratives of group behaviour in fourth- to seventh-century conciliar documents, with emphasis on the Greek

and Latin collections and ancient translations into Syriac, Coptic and Ge'ez. They are placed in the context of texts attesting local practices of dispute resolution and regional political or religious rituals of representative bodies. The project examines the status gained by the subject matter to which consensus or unanimity was attributed, and the processes by which they were connected to the text during its transmission. The main planned research output of the Fellowship is the manuscript of a monograph on communicative strategies on decision-making rituals reflected in proceedings of Christian synods and of Roman dispute resolution bodies.

II. Interdisciplinary Engagement with Consensus

Recent studies of late-antique historiography, epistolography and oratory highlight their apologetic or polemical character.¹ They show that they do not have the descriptive and ordering character of modern history, imbued with the contemporary trust in the power of reason, nor the truth-value attached to them by religious traditions. Therefore, they should not be read too literally nor regarded as factual and reliable witnesses of the actions. The project engages with theories about the development and influence of Roman and Christian identities, and the existence of religious or political reference institution, especially about seeming similarities between their rituals and proceedings of decision-making gatherings. It focuses on the interaction between representative bodies and persons of the Roman Empire and of institutionalised Christianities, as seen in the writings addressed to the emperor, the court, the officers, and senators, on the one hand, and to synods, monasteries, congregations, bishops and holy men, on the other, which refer to collective bodies, their consensus and often report on unanimous statements. Along the way, the proposed research will trace their relation to the development of doctrines of democracy, imperialism, ecclesiology, caesaropapism, and engage with current popular and academic concepts about the Early Christian Church and Byzantium. It is thus particularly relevant to understand the truth and antiquity of several claims used to formulate the self-understanding of contemporary religious groups, especially of denominations which inform the concept of institutionalised religions in social sciences.

Interdisciplinary studies show that in Late Antiquity, individuals lived out the various religious, cultural and linguistic realities to which they belonged or with which they had contact balancing flexibility and attachment. Therefore, conscientious membership of a group will be analysed in relation to other identities which were held concomitantly or in other contexts.² This asks for a more nuanced view of the statements about the institutions, boundaries and traditions, and an authorial voice employing designations known to his audience or creating new appellations will be sought in the use of social, cultural and religious identifiers or collective nouns. Furthermore, the reception and canonisation of concepts and structures by themselves or within antiquity itself will be analysed. Particular attention will be given to editorial interventions, and to claims of continuity and absence of change or of coherence or universality of traditions, concepts and institutions. Texts narrating rituals such as the *adventus* of emperors, the appointment of religious leaders and leg-

¹See Ando 2010, Van Nuffelen 2015, Allen and Neil 2013 and Gemeinhardt *et al.* 2016.

²E.g. Bell 2009, 241-2; Rebillard 2012.

islative and juridical decision-making used unanimity and consensus conspicuously.³ Reducing the oral-written boundary, the ritual character usually associated with them is itself a distinctive mark of its literariness, and part of the communicative strategies used to render the reaction of crowds or groups as largely accurate registers of events. A closer reading situates the texts in the development of the religious and/or socio-political identity of the group, and reveals the enunciative force of the author's *mise-en-scène* and description of the action.⁴ Representations of consensus and unanimity are also found in numerous texts on decision-making, arbitration, dispute resolution and consensual discourses, which have a marked regional character or attest religious and cultural rituals of 'minorities' and groups at the margin or outside the Roman Empire. In particular, texts about city councils in Asia Minor and Egypt, political acclamations in Arabia or Persia and rabbinic legislation have been discussed in recent scholarship which has shown their relation to and independence from Graeco-Roman literary traditions and Roman imperial identity. Continuing research on synodical proceedings, the project will discuss to what extent ecclesiastical bodies can be considered Roman institutions. The composition and transmission of Rabbinic writings and their links with oral practices is also relevant to understand texts which are known to have been made or transmitted vying for a Roman, Byzantine or Christian audience.⁵ Their availability and relevance for interdisciplinary research justifies including them as comparative material, not least because of the paucity of information in this period about the Senate and the rituals at the senate-houses in Rome and Constantinople and the partiality of the texts about Christian synods.⁶

The goal of this project is the writing of a book manuscript on collective identity and the authority of consensus in Late Antiquity and early Byzantium, especially from the fourth to seventh centuries. It will present analyses of narratives of collective statements and consensual dispute resolution and decision-making, focusing on Christian communication with socio-political Roman imperial institutions. They will be correlated with narratives on consensus and unanimous attitudes of other representational bodies which have a distinct social identity, chiefly the senate-houses in Rome and Constantinople, and the patterns of individualising resource to the spaces of freedom created by the respective forms of collectivity will be compared. The monograph will be structured around the analysis of some well documented narratives of group behaviour in conciliar documents, with emphasis on the Greek and Latin collections and ancient translations into Syriac, Coptic and Ge'ez.

The literary and papyrological evidence of local (imperial or regional) arbitration and dispute resolution will also be considered.⁷ Attention will be given to literary, epigraphical and graffiti sources which present the viewer with narratives that characterise the reported discourse as spontaneous and unpremeditated. Thus, the repertory of case-studies will encompass a number of late-antique and Byzantine manuscript, epigraphic and papyrological texts, mostly in Greek, Syriac, Latin and Coptic, as well as archaeological studies. This will expand the research already done on acclamations and imperial, senatorial and Cyrillian identities, in part developed in collaboration

³Rammelt 2013, 127–144; Price 2014; Frenkel 2016a; Salway 2013, 125–2; Mattheis 2014; Wiemer 2013, 173–202.

⁴Skinner 2008, Ando 2000, Pfeilschifter 2013, Wienand 2015.

⁵Cotton 2009, Rebillard and Rüpke 2015.

⁶Kaldellis 2015; Roller 2015; Graumann 2017; Kuhn 2012; Börm 2010.

⁷Kelly 2011, Haensch 2013, Bryen 2014.

with members of the RSRC at Ghent University and the KFG itself. The publication of results of this research in the size and style constraints of articles and chapters does not allow for the case studies and the changes in their interpretation to be analysed in sufficient detail to present a nuanced view that is furthermore accessible and relevant for scholars with various perspectives, and to the wider public.

The collegiate setting at MWK allows for theological, historical and social studies to mature into a relevant reflection on the use of the past in contemporary societies, and is ideal for the writing of the intended book manuscript. Its pluralistic approach, which fosters research on the representation of social gatherings, cultural movements and collective decision-making processes in written, visual and social media of various cultures and periods will also contribute to refine the research questions and the methodology, incorporating the debates on ritual and identity and on the continuity and variation of the religious and socio-political bodies under consideration. At the Kolleg, frequent lively colloquia, on closely related or seemingly distant topics can contribute up-to-date relevant information and abundant material to reflect on and, when necessary, rethink methodologies. They help to avoid academic compartmentalisation and the pitfalls of ingrained preconceptions. The MWK stands out for allowing for the constant dynamic engagement with work in progress, the dialogue with specialists of other fields, and through them with the major international research centres, particularly those in Germany, Austria, France, Italy and the United Kingdom. During my previous short fellowship, I had the pleasure to exchange ideas and develop arguments in the friendly setting of the colloquia and in encounters with Richard Gordon, Markus and Jutta Vinzent, Julie Casteigt, Andrés Quero-Sanchez, Matthias Jung and Günther Schörner, not to mention Martin Fuchs and Antje Linkenbach-Fuchs, Georgia Petridou and Dietmar Mieth. Our constructive dialogue, mostly in German, dwelt often on the reception and representation of Classical institutions and narratives, the initial relevance, subsequent transmission and later reception of early and medieval Christian polemics, and the relevance of the material aspects of the sources, including the influence of orality and literary reuse on the text. With Katharina Waldner, Veit Rosenberg and Anna-Katharina Rieger, the discussions were usually about religious rituals, discourses of minorities, the potential of Digital Humanities and the challenges of Open Sourcing research in the humanities. The fellowship would allow me to renew the conversation with them and especially to develop further with Jörg Rüpke some new insights into Roman identity and practices, which we began to discuss focusing on the relation between imperial deification and late-antique monotheistic polemics.

II.a. New Research

The main new research pursued during the Fellowship will analyse the religious discourses present both in individual (possibly de-individualising) perceptions of the collectivity of the representative body by one of its members (*e.g.* in apologetic writings), and the differentiation by non-members between individuals as such and as members of the consensus, especially in historiographical representation of credal statements.⁸ It will build on the research pursued on papyri of court proceedings,

⁸On religious significance of history in Christian contexts, see Boulluc 2001.

Greek historiography and Eastern hagiography which has led during 2016 to new perspectives also on sources previously considered, particularly the conciliar and legal documents relevant for the identity of several religious and social bodies past and present. The current project builds on the approach to discourses and narratives in lived ancient religions. It moves a step further, examining the construction of tradition within lived religion in its socio-political context. That is, it analyses texts that are associated with traditions as discourses which are registered in writing to communicate intentionally with contemporaries as well as backward and forward in time, representing a 'past' and advancing this view to future audiences.

Engaging with the bias of the contemporary interpretation of the texts due to the influence of transmission and earlier reception, all chapters of the planned monograph will consider the most recent results on textual criticism and on the factors which influenced medieval and modern reception of the sources.⁹ The monograph should finally present the reader with an account of the narratives of consensual and unanimous actions that dissociates them from the canonical status some versions gained, not least by the respect some manuscripts enjoyed and the pervasiveness some printed versions gained in the last millennium.¹⁰

III. Hypotheses, Material and Methodology

In addition to the aforesaid, the research project will pursue two lines of interdisciplinary studies, to investigate the narratives about consensus in religious and socio-political representative bodies: (I) since individuals lived out the various religious, cultural and linguistic realities to which they belonged or with which they had contact balancing flexibility and attachment, conscious membership of a group will be analysed in relation to other identities which were held concomitantly or in other contexts. This will help to nuance statements about the institutions, boundaries and traditions, and see in the use of social, cultural and religious identifiers or collective nouns an authorial voice employing designations known to his audience or creating new appellations; (II) the research of the reception and canonisation of concepts and structures by themselves or within antiquity itself, and of the editorial interventions incorporated into the texts referring to consensus and unanimity, will allow for the analysis of largely ingrained claims of continuity and absence of change and of coherence or universality of traditions, concepts and institutions.

IV. Planned Publications and Working Programme

The main goal is to complete a manuscript (main-matter with sketch of the footnotes) of a monograph on late-antique narratives of collective statements and consensual dispute resolution and decision-making, focusing on Christian communication with socio-political Roman imperial institutions. It will incorporate much research already done on the transmission of proceedings, the rituals and identity of the late-antique Roman Senates and Christian synods. It is possible that by

⁹E.g. Lamberz 2007.

¹⁰Cf. current projects of Classicists and historians of Roman politics and law on Cicero's writings (C.H. Pieper, Leiden), papyri of dispute resolution (A. Dolganov and B. Palme, Vienna) and legal codes (O.E. Tellegen-Couperus, S. Corcoran and C. Hezser).

September 2017 a leading publisher may have been secured already.¹¹ The first three months will focus on gathering the sources and studies already identified as relevant to supplement the case studies published in *RRE* 2.2 and *Studia Patristica* 74, to appear in collective volumes, and in preparation. These also suggest possible structures of the monograph, which will be laid out at this time so that the chapters written over the next half year fuse into a unified whole. In the last three months, one of the chapters will be consolidated, and having gathered the necessary bibliography during the ten months at MWK, the goal is to complete the book within a year of the Junior Fellowship.

Research, writing and revising articles related to papers presented previously at conferences will be carried out as diligently as possible so as not to delay work on the main proposed scholarly work. This will be facilitated by the resources at Erfurt and the possibility to consult specialists on issues raised by reviewers and editors. The libraries and electronic resources available in Erfurt, the help of *Hilfskräfte* at the *Universitäts- und Forschungsbibliothek Erfurt/Gotha* and at the Kolleg, its support for interlibrary loans from the libraries affiliated to the *Gemeinsamen Bibliotheksverbund* (GBV), and all the infrastructure and facilities which are placed at the disposal of its members are more than adequate for the proposed research project. In particular the friendly expert assistance offered by the directorship (themselves scholars but nowadays fully committed to promote the Kolleg and the impact of its academic output) and the secretaries (familiar with the peculiarities of research in the Humanities, diverse academic demands and documentation), allows fellows to focus on research and intellectual exchange of its fruits within academia and helps to give visibility to their research projects, thus contributing to their impact, in reach and significance.

Once the outcome of this application is known, I will contact members of the MWK during the tenure of the fellowship who might share the interest in organising a workshop, for example on ‘the late-antique and early Byzantine political and historiographical (de-)construction of the authority of Christian synods and Roman law’ and legislative practice in the areas once under Roman rule in the East. For this theme, possible speakers include members of research projects in Wien (FWF Project on Roman Court Proceedings in Papyri), Pisa (ERC REDHIS), Bamberg (ERC Proceedings of the Ecumenical Councils), Bonn (Ephesus 431 – ACO), etc. Thus, in alphabetical order, some possible speakers would be C. Ando, P. Blaudeau, T. Brüggemann, S. Corcoran, A. Dolganov, M. Fressura, T. Graumann, R. Haensch, K. Klein, E. Lamberz, S. Lütke-meier and R. Price. Calls for papers may be sent to the usual lists and social media, probably in November 2017, with a reminder following in January 2018, and a deadline for the end of February 2018. The workshop could be scheduled for May 2018, bearing in mind the programme of the MWK. Publishers may then be contacted in July 2018 for an initial enquiry about publishing a well-rounded selection of the papers.

¹¹At the 2015 Oxford Patristic Conference, the subject specific editors of Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press and Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. expressed their interest in publishing it as a peer-reviewed printed (and electronic) book. At the 2016 British Patristics Conference, Anna Turton pointed out that the book would fit the profile of T&T Clark (Bloomsbury Publishing).

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