

Workshop 2
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Abstracts

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'Fools for Christ' in Byzantium: Religious Extremism as a Response to Sociopolitical Crisis

From the point of view of hagiography, the 500 – 1000 CE period in Byzantium opens and closes with a monumental biography of a 'Fool for Christ': St Symeon in 6th century Syria and St Andrew in 10th century Constantinople (Rydén 1978). Both the 6th and the 10th century, albeit for quite different reasons (the former mainly due to natural disasters, while the latter chiefly because of sociocultural and political developments), are periods that faced major crises. In this respect, the present paper puts forward the following working hypothesis: the fact that the most typical Byzantine 'Fools for Christ' come from these centuries is indicative of their character as a response to the sociopolitical crisis of their times, and also the more extreme the character of the respective crises, the more it made sense and was expected to be presented with a religiously extreme response/solution to the crisis.

As a phenomenon 'Fools for Christ' have been linked (Krueger 1996) to ancient Cynics and the concomitant aspects of city criticism, elite internal critique, the symbolic need for purification, as well as social consolidation through moral advancement. Comparisons have also been made with the multiple social roles that shamans have played within their cultures (Thompson 1978) or with the provocative function of liminal social figures (Angelides 1993). The present paper will explore the working hypothesis mentioned above in order to answer questions such as: In which specific ways did the figures of St Symeon and St Andrew function as solutions to the crisis of their times? How are we to explain their religious extremism as a means for sociopolitical stability? What does 'Foolishness for Christ' reveal regarding the relationship between religion and society?

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**Internalizing Crisis in Maximus the Confessor:
The End of the Empire and a Platonizing Change from Eschatology to Revelation**

Byzantine apocalyptic literature typically associates the end of times with major historical events, for example, the enthronement of an emperor or successful enemy attacks, events interpreted as pointers of the final stage before the promised second advent of God. Although eschatological accounts such as those we come across in the Sibylline books are notoriously vague regarding the exact identity of the emperor or enemies involved, yet they are firmly anchored in history. By the eighth century and in the aftermath of the catastrophic reign of Heraclius who proved unable to stop the advancement of the Arabs and who was identified with the last Roman Emperor (Alexander 1985, 158-159), pseudo-Methodius and pseudo-Athanasius produced such apocalyptic accounts. Propagating fear and uncertainty, however, such influential texts presented both the empire and the church with an especially challenging problem. Thus, already in the fourth century Athanasius of Alexandria tried to discredit similar eschatological accounts (Heil 2020), while in the sixth century Justinian, famously identified by Procopius with the Antichrist (*Sec. Hist.* 12:20-32), is mentioned by John of Ephesus as trying to control rising pagan superstition early in the pandemic that ravished the empire during his reign (Nau 1915, 481-482).

Constant speculation, however, and uncertainty are not states in which congregations thrive. Thus, here I want to explore a parallel tradition which begins in Plato and his Metaphor of the Cave and is ingeniously blended with the early Christian pilgrimage to Biblical caves, a pilgrimage mapped out and established already by Constantine the Great. Focusing on improving one's spiritual condition and dedicating oneself in the *vita negativa*, emulating the example of numerous Biblical characters, martyrs and saints who are typically said to have discovered God in situations of physical darkness, confinement, and distress, Christian ascetics set a powerful example of disregarding historical time and of replacing their fears about the end of the world with a personal sense of salvation achieved at the point of finding God. Well-versed in Plato and his Neoplatonic Commentators, especially Proclus, like a number of ascetic thinkers before him, Maximus in the seventh century uses his *Mystagogia* to explain to his congregation how to do just that: save the empire of God by achieving a personal revelation. My paper considers the dynamics of this major cognitive shift in the context of contemporary Byzantine theological and intellectual traditions.

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Zoroastrian eschatological thought in Sasanian times

The paper will focus on the development of Zoroastrian doctrine on the End of Time in Sasanian times, when the dynasty was engaged in fostering a new understanding of Iranian National History, merging ancient Avestan traditions with their own beliefs. Eschatological and apocalyptic beliefs will be investigated with the aim of identifying different layers of traditions possibly revealing the work of the different schools of thought active in Late Antique and Medieval Iran.

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Apocalyptic Speculation and Authority in the Early Byzantine World: Dynamics and Strategies

Apocalyptic speculation lends itself well to situations where leaders and groups seek to establish, impose, or maintain authority, especially in times of crisis. The late Roman/early Byzantine world is no exception. The heavenly origin of the apocalyptic revelation and the conviction that God remains in control of history anchor a powerful theology of history. This conviction is amplified by the *post facto* character of many apocalyptic prophecies, courtesy of their pseudonymous attribution to authoritative figures from the past. At the same time, the radical dualism of the apocalyptic worldview allows for the ready disposition of nations, peoples, and personalities into two irreducible and antagonistic groups, and where the Enemy can be construed extramurally or intramurally (and sometimes as both). The prospect of eschatological paradise or perdition for the one group or the other underwrites a coherent soteriology and theory of justice that validate present-day claims to authority.

Most importantly, the social functions of apocalyptic speculation are expressed in two registers or "voices," each of which freight claims of authority. The *revolutionary voice* is the original, primary, and organic voice. It represents the perspective of groups that foresee existential dissolution at the hands of an Enemy. The impending eschaton signals the overthrow of the oppressor, justification for the Elect, and salvation from the authority of the evil current intolerable state. The apocalyptic platform tends to be radically utopian, and the writings operate as crisis literature. Apocalyptic speculation in the *imperial voice* by contrast does not proceed from a setting of social disadvantage. The eschatological horizon of the apocalyptic worldview remains, but its urgency is sublimated or sidetracked in favour of the status quo, backed by the guarantee of the eschaton to come. The apocalyptic platform is geared to present-day authority, for which the writings encourage support. The imperial voice appeals to stakeholder elements in society and their supporters and collaborators. In some cases, a new order seeks to establish its place within the historical framework; in others, the apocalyptic framework is deployed by two sides to advance competing claims to power.

This paper has two parts. The first unpacks the dynamics of apocalyptic authority, in particular its foundations in the axioms of the apocalyptic worldview and the mechanisms by which its eschatological horizon facilitates claims to present-day authority. The second part presents selected examples of the uses of apocalyptic authority in the late Roman/early Byzantine world by different groups and in response to different kinds of crises. Special attention will be devoted to the focusing questions of this workshop.

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The Three Theodoroi: A Case Study in Adaptations of Symbols of Authority in Response to Crisis.

This paper looks at two moments of adaptation of symbols of authority, one in which local communities adapted iconographies and narratives of victorious warriors that had primarily been associated with the emperors to bolster local heroes in the seventh and eighth centuries, and a second in which a resurgent empire coopted these local traditions to rebuild imperial authority in the ninth and tenth centuries.

The first part of the paper examines how the city of Euchaita took an iconography that seems to have been associated with Imperial victory and transformed it into a symbol of their local martyr. This was in response to a crisis in which the city was left to its own defenses, and the community gave credit to their local hero for their survival rather than to the emperor. The paper then turns to the figure of Theodoros of Sykeon, in rural Galatia, which adapts a birth narrative from imperial legends and makes it the story of a local saint. The narrative then turns to a story of Theodoros of Sykeon being recruited by Saint Georgios into the heavenly army, rather than the worldly one. Theodoros then went on to become a monk and bishop rather than a soldier, general, or emperor. This narrative was written during the Persian War (602-628 CE) and represents a local reaction to the empire's borders collapsing. The paper then briefly outlines an artistic tradition that began to develop of Theodoros "the Recruit," which spread throughout Anatolia by the ninth century, and links it to these two adaptations of imperial authority in response to crisis.

The paper then concludes by turning to the Imperial reaction to these local adaptations once the empire had survived the crisis and was rebuilding. In the case of the two Theodoroi this paper looks at, a third Theodoros that was a close duplicate of Theodoros of Amasia was created by the tenth century, possibly as an explanation for art that had been created as a depiction of Theodoros of Sykeon. The paper suggests that this occurred because Theodoros of Sykeon's narrative did not support a new narrative in which images of Christian soldiers were once again symbols of imperial authority.

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The Syriac *Alexanderlied* and Apocalyptic Responses to Crises in the Eastern Roman Empire

My paper will focus on a Syriac text, known as the *Alexanderlied*. The *Alexanderlied* is transmitted as a metrical discourse (*mēm̄rā*) pseudepigraphally attributed to the Syriac Church Father, Jacob of Serūgh. This lengthy poetical narrative is structured as an apocalyptic text that includes a dream vision revealed to Alexander by an angel as well as horrific visions of the end of the world before the Last Judgement.

Furthermore, this writing belongs to a Syriac textual tradition relating to Alexander the Great that has been especially influential towards a new understanding of apocalyptic motifs, such as the eschatological peoples, Gog and Magog, or even the production of new significant apocalyptic topoi, such as the legend of the Last Roman Emperor. Characteristically, Alexander the Great is stylised as a pious Christian king and prophet of the end of times in this context.

The *Alexanderlied* belongs to those formative texts that shaped an apocalyptic political ideology according to which the Christian Roman Empire will be the final kingdom on earth before Jesus' Second Coming and the Last Judgment. This apocalyptic view of world history came to dominate the Christian political discourse for centuries to come and especially after the emergence and spread of Islam.

In my paper, I will discuss how this specific apocalyptic understanding of history develops as a response to political and historical crises in the Eastern Roman Empire. A special focus of the paper will be on the relation of this writing to the history of apocalyptic literary tradition in Late Antiquity. More specifically, I will look at how literary and apocalyptic motifs shape the narrative of historical events but also at how historical events influence the formation and development of apocalyptic literature.

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The Crises of Heresy in Eastern Roman Empire: A Case Study of the Bogomils from the 10th to 11th Centuries

The appearance and propagation of heresy throughout both Eastern and Western Christendom during the Medieval era was perceived and presented by the contemporary ecclesiastical and secular authorities as existential crises that required the action of both Church and State to combat and destroy. This article will investigate the various ways that surviving texts in relation to the Dualistic sect known as the Bogomils, from the 10th to 11th centuries, describe the various crises that the Bogomils were thought to present in the minds of the authors and their intended audiences. Specifically, the texts selected for this comparative study are Cosmas the Presbyter's *Sermon Against Heretics*, Euthymius of Akmonia's *Letter* and Michael Psellus' *On the Operation of Daemons*. Focus will be given to three major areas of crisis identifiable within these texts. The first area is that of social crisis. The analysis here will focus on how the Bogomil heresy was depicted as a corrupting and destabilizing force within society. The second is the field of theological crisis. This will examine how the Bogomils presented a challenge to the doctrine of the Church and in what ways the presence of the Bogomils within society came to be interpreted within particular theological

and eschatological emphases. The final area is that of political crisis. Here particular attention will be given to how the Bogomils were seen as representing a threat, whether real or imagined, to the political authority and legitimacy of both the imperial state and that of the established ecclesiastical hierarchies.

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Ideals of leadership in ninth-century medieval Greek apocalypses

Ninth-century Byzantium saw a stark proliferation of apocalyptic narratives. Arab advances in Sicily, in particular, spurred the production of prophetic revelations that predicted the impending turn of events in favor of the Romans. These prophecies produced a standardized narrative of the end times, which revolves around the deeds of good and bad emperors. By specifying physiognomic characterizations, symbolic actions, and typological patterns, they furnish paradigms of good and bad leadership. This paper surveys a group of four ninth-century apocalypses; a group that has been dubbed by Paul Alexander the 'Sicilian' prophecies. It is shown how by placing imperial agency into an eschatological context, the apocalyptists prescribe methods for discerning good and bad leadership and, concomitantly, stress the crucial role imperial incumbents play in resolving crises. That is, they provided epistemological models for crisis management.

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The Significance of the Cross in Byzantine and Islamic Apocalyptic Literature of the 7th and 8th Centuries

The cross of Christ served as an important point of contention within the Byzantine and Islamic apocalyptic literature during the 7th and 8th centuries. Following the swift contraction of the Byzantine Empire in the 7th century after the Arab invasion, the Syriac apocalypse, *Pseudo-Methodius*, promoted the idea of an expected imperial resurgence that would inevitably free the Christians from Islamic oppression and usher in the Second Coming of Christ. At the crux of the story, a righteous emperor would reconquer Jerusalem, walk up Golgotha, and offer his imperial crown to Christ upon a cross. Therefore, emphasizing the continued importance of the Christian mythos regarding the death and resurrection of Christ as central to Byzantine perseverance in the wake of catastrophe. Unsurprisingly, the Islamic apocalyptic literature found within the collections of Nu'aym ibn Hammād al-Marwazī present a different interpretation concerning the cross. According to David Cook, the sayings collected by Nu'aym were from the period following the Arab defeat at Constantinople in 717 AD. In these narratives, the cross is rejected as a symbol of salvation, and rather than Christ receiving a crown upon his cross, the Islamic Jesus breaks the cross in defiance of Byzantine military success. As the cross received much attention during this period, especially following the return of the piece of the True Cross by Emperor Heraclius, it is my intention to highlight the intercultural dialogue surrounding this important symbol that remained at the heart of apocalyptic expectation in both Byzantine and Islamic literature.

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Emotion and Liturgy in Times of Epidemic: The Case of the Justinianic Plague

While natural disasters provoked liturgical reform in Constantinople, including the emergence of a rite for the commemoration of earthquakes in the mid-fifth century, a similar response to the Justinianic Plague that began in the 540s appears to be lacking. Unlike the litanies of the West, which sought to invoke the forgiveness and mercy of God in the face of an epidemic, such liturgical processions are absent from the East. However, scholars such as Mischa Meier have argued that the plague was a catalyst for intense devotion to the Theotokos and the sacralization of the emperor, as well as what Averil Cameron called *liturgification*. Despite an intensifying spirit of apocalypticism, the portrayal of the eschaton in sixth-century hymnody sought to shape and sustain emotional and liturgical communities amidst the fear of God's wrath. Hymns by Romanos the Melodist such as 'On the Second Coming' and 'On the Ten Virgins' may not have been commissioned by the emperor in the same way the hymn 'On Earthquakes and Fires' arguably was, but they served as emotional and liturgical scripts for the faithful in a time of crisis. And yet, the hymns also suggest Byzantine Christianity felt an underlying ambivalence towards ecological phenomena. This paper will explore the liturgical and imperial complexity of plague, sin and fear during the reign of Justinian.

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Antichrist rhetoric in letters between ninth-century Rome and Byzantium

The place of apocalyptic rhetoric in reformation disputes between Protestants and Catholics is well known, with the pope a frequent target of the antichrist label. It is less often recognised that such slanders were a feature of rivalrous exchanges between Roman and Byzantine Christians in the lead-up to the Photian schism of the late ninth century. Using letters as my main source, I analyse the ways the term antichrist was reframed to deal with schismatic Christians in the ninth century. Letters between leaders (bishops, monks and imperial court members) display divisive apocalyptic rhetoric. I look at the reasons why, in their historical context. Were they always a strategy of coercion or sometimes a means of comfort? Our epistolary sources include letters of Pope Gregory the Great, Maximus the Confessor, Pope Nicholas I and Photius, patriarch of Constantinople, especially his encyclical letter of 867 to the Eastern patriarchs.

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"So everyone says, be they great or small" Writing history in the post-apocalypse

The fall of the Sasanian dynasty (c.224-c.651) was not simply the end of a political order. Because these kings cast their rule as a continuation of Iranian sacred history, their fall to the forces of Islam severed this Mazdean or Zoroastrian narrative from the new ideology of secular power. This left an influential faction of the "Zoroastrian" priesthood with an ideology no longer fit for purpose. One reaction to this situation was the development of an apocalyptic of restoration, one that associated the rule of the Arabs with the millennial disasters of Zoroastrian apocalyptic. Here I will argue that another response can be recovered

from later Zoroastrian literature: the reconstruction of the Sasanian period in an idealised light.

Within a late medieval communication between the Zoroastrian communities of Iran and India we find a New Persian poem detailing the affair of the “heretic” Mazdak and king Kavad I (r.488-496 and 499-531). The realities of this episode are extremely obscure, the interpretation offered in this poem is not. Here a heroic priestly figure and a pious prince save the king, and the empire, from an immoral grifter. The slant of this episode is echoed in similarly ahistorical set piece involving the Sasanian court; the trial of the prophet Mani under Bahram I (r.271-274) as portrayed in the Perso-Arabic historical tradition. Both episodes suggest that the priests and scribes of the dwindling Zoroastrian community dealt with Sasanian history by emphasising their own role in it. Their need to direct history in this manner supports recent suggestions that the idea of Sasanian “orthodoxy” was largely built up in the late Sasanian and post-Sasanian period as a response to internal and external challenges to priestly legitimacy.

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Good and Bad Rulers in Byzantine Apocalyptic Imagination and its Armenian Reception

This paper will explore the idea of good and bad rulers that punctuate Byzantine apocalyptic speculations as active agents of various end-time scenarios. After singling out several widely attested topoi, I will then explore how these traditions morphed into more specific images of rulers in medieval Armenian apocalyptic texts. I will particularly focus on what these texts can tell us about the needs and concerns of their anonymous authors or audiences at times when an acute feeling of crisis may have permeated some circles, such as during Seljuq or Mongol conquests of historical Armenia and Anatolia.

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Imperial leadership and urban resilience: Earthquakes, religion, and charity in sixth-century Antioch

In 526 Antioch was hit by one of the most devastating earthquakes in its history. Such natural disasters wreaked considerable havoc on the material fabric and the social cohesion of late antique urban centres. Moreover, in Christian thought earthquakes were considered a sign of the end times and as such were imbued with theological meaning. One of the responses was to give Antioch the apotropaic new name of Theopolis.

In this paper I will explore imperial leadership in the face of the crises generated by earthquakes. Taking the 526 earthquake as a starting point, I will examine the different forms of imperial crisis management after earthquakes in the Later Roman Empire. What public actions did the emperor take to regain divine and popular trust? What types of benefactions were offered to the affected city? And what role did urban local leaders play in dealing with the crisis at Antioch? The symbolic behaviour of the emperor and the imperial building patronage of Antioch after the earthquake were a form of crisis and risk management: both the relationship with the divine and the physical landscape of the city had to be restored.

In its direct aftermath an earthquake ushered in a period of immediate social, political, and economic turmoil and crisis, but it also necessitated a longer period of physical and spiritual reconstruction. The patronage of the imperial couple Justinian and Theodora in the wake of the disaster was crucial in rebuilding the devastated city and restoring its social order, but their interventions also allowed them to recalibrate the urban religious landscape and to shape social relations.

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**David and Melchizedek: The Return of the Imperial Priesthood from Justinian I to
Constans II**

With the rise of imperial Christianity emperors sought in varying ways to inject themselves into doctrinal affairs. Safeguarding orthodoxy quickly became a matter of strategic concern and imperial prerogative. While as Alan Cameron observed, Roman emperors maintained the office of Pontifex Maximus endured well into the Christian era and used this power to mediate religious affairs, in Christianity the emperor remained a layman.

While the imperial claim on the role of Pontifex Maximus would fade with little fanfare, Christian emperors would eventually make attempts to endow their office with its own priesthood. Gilbert Dagron argues that such ideas had been present since Constantine the Great (d. 337 C.E.) claimed to be a “bishop of outsiders” and found its clearest expression in Leo III’s declaration, “I am Emperor and Priest”. However, little evidence survives between Constantine and Leo III (d. 741 C.E.) attesting to the development of an imperial priesthood. Inklings of such ambitions can be seen in the reign of Justinian I (d. 565). From his supposed composition of the hymn “Only begotten son” in the Divine Liturgy, to iconographic depictions at San Vitale and Mt. Sinai, evidence suggests a subtle adoption of an ideology of imperial priesthood, even if such ambitions were not expressed overtly. By the seventh century the historian Theophylact Simocatta would make veiled references to the high priesthood of the emperor Heraclius (d. 641), whose Christomimetic *restoratio crucis* and imperial legislation in the Christological controversies of the period suggest further development of this concept. By the reign of Constans II (d. 668 C.E.), the monk Maximus the Confessor was tried for treason in Constantinople. Among the charges was the confessor’s denial that the emperor was a priest. This accusation represents the first explicit claim of the priesthood of the emperor since Constantine, suggesting that by the reign of Constans II, the imperial office carried priestly connotations based on the biblical Melchizedek.

This paper traces the development of the priesthood of the Christian Roman emperor, from the reign of Justinian I to the priestly ambitions of the Heraclian dynasty. Of interest are the ways in which these emperors attempted to leverage priestly functions to maintain control during crises, including foreign invasion and religious division.