

Shifting Fortunes in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

Edinburgh's Centre for Late Antique, Islamic and Byzantine Studies (CLAIBS) is pleased to announce the call for papers for the 6th International Graduate Conference in Late Antique, Islamic and Byzantine Studies, to take place on 24th-25th April, 2025, at the University of Edinburgh. We invite papers which approach the theme of 'shifting fortunes' in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, from a global perspective.

The fortunes of individuals, communities and states in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages were far from fixed certainties, and whilst any number of sudden crises and exigencies could bring fortunes crashing down, there was also ample opportunity for them to be built up, transformed, and consolidated. Therefore, securing one's fortunes, be they political, economic or spiritual, was of paramount importance to all members of late antique and medieval societies. Whether in the imperial cities of Constantinople and Rome, the caliphal courts of Baghdad, Cordoba and Cairo, or in the courts of Paris and Léon, decisions were made, edicts and chrysobulls were issued, taxes were raised, theologies were disputed, and wars were waged, all in the name of securing the good fortune of ruling interests. Beyond the actions of caliphs, emperors and kings, one is greeted by an assortment of ways in which individuals and communities sought to enhance their own fortunes, be it through pious dedications, participation in religious ritual, production or patronage of literature, economic activities or acts of rebellion. On the other hand, a drop in fortunes could be heralded by environmental factors, such as plague, famine, drought, or through instances of external and internal conflict like invasion, civil war and fitnah.

This conference will focus on this theme of shifting fortunes and examine both the factors underpinning change, as well as the various processes and dynamics through which the creation, consolidation, and collapse of fortunes came to pass. For instance, how were fortunes negotiated and renegotiated across the period, and how far did this differ across the boundaries of social class, gender, religious identity and geography? Given the broad range of possible applications of 'shifting fortunes' as an avenue of historical inquiry, we encourage the submission of papers which broach a wide array of topics and adopt innovative methodological approaches in their case studies. Moreover, the scope of this conference shall go beyond Centre's focus on Late Antiquity, Islamic and Byzantine Studies. As such, we shall also incorporate contributions from a global medieval perspective.

Keynote Speaker: Dr Krystina Kubina (Austrian Academy of Sciences)

We particularly encourage contributions on the suggested topics below, however, papers which approach the theme of 'shifting fortunes' from other angles will also be considered:

Political perspectives – Administrative, legislative and judicial changes and policies brought about to bolster fortunes or as a response to a regression in fortunes. Political actions taken in the name of fortune, be they usurpations, rebellions, ceremonies and rituals, the production of propaganda, or political strategy and intrigue.

Economic perspectives – The extent to which fortunes were determined by economic, monetary and fiscal changes enacted by ruling systems. The influence of overland and maritime trade networks on the fortunes of states, communities and individuals. Economic actions of non-ruling classes.

Ecological perspectives – How did ecological changes, be they fortuitous or catastrophic, influence the fortunes of those affected, and how did individuals, communities and states respond to, negotiate, and mitigate these changes?

Resistance and upheaval – The reaction of communities to changes in their political and economic fortunes, their strategies of resistance (e.g. refusal to pay taxes, rebellion), and the ideological underpinnings of resistance.

Ideological perspectives – What role did ideologies fulfil in shaping the fortunes of its adherents, or of those subjected to the whims of its adherents? How did 'official' ideologies shape the socio-political landscape, and to what extent did ideological trends underpin complex processes of decision making, the pursuit of justice and the use of propaganda?

Religious perspectives – The actions taken by states, communities and individuals to either consolidate and build upon their fortunes, be that through the consolidation of their religious identity, or as a response to challenges against it. The processes of negotiation and mediation through which individuals and communities secured their spiritual fortunes, be it dedications, donations or participation in ritual. Inter-faith and cross-confessional dialogues and interactions, divergences from orthodox religious praxis, and the interrelationships of religious hierarchy.

A view from below – What of those individuals and communities traditionally left in the dark by the aristocratic orientation of our literary sources? How far can 'low register' vernacular literature, archives, papyri, tax records and inquisition registers inform us of the fortunes and misfortunes of these groups, and the strategies of change available to them?

Aspects of patronage – Acts of patronage, in all their myriad forms, are attested across the breadth of Late Antique and medieval societies, regardless of the boundaries of gender and religious identity, social class or ethnic identity. What did patrons seek to gain through these financial investments, and how does this relate to personal and communal fortunes?

Literary perspectives – The production of literature represented a significant investment of resources, in terms of both the time and effort demanded by the writing of an original composition, as well as the financial investment of creating the physical text in manuscript form. Understanding the motivations behind such investments leaves us well-positioned to determine what truly mattered to these individuals. What, therefore, was to be gained from literary production? The bolstering of one's economic, political or spiritual fortunes? The accrual of social legitimacy? The curation of one's programme of self-representation?

The deadline for abstracts is the 21st February and notification of acceptance will be confirmed by 7th March. Please submit your abstract of no more than 300 words, and a 100-word professional biography to edibyzpg@ed.ac.uk. We kindly welcome submissions from individuals or groups. Lunch will be provided on both days, and there will be a small registration fee of £20 for attendees. For speakers, we hope to waive this registration fee, but further information will be provided at a later date.

