Seventh International Graduate Conference in Late Antique, Islamic and Byzantine Studies:

Institutional identities in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

Teviot Lecture Theatre, Doorway 5, Old Medical School, The University of Edinburgh, Central Area, Teviot Place, Edinburgh, EH8 9AG

Timetable

First Day (18/05):

8:45 Registration

9:00-9:15 Welcome and Opening Remarks

9:15-11:00 **Panel 1: Institutionally Created Identity** (Chair: Marie Legendre)

1. Thomas McBarron (University of St Andrews), *Enslaved Elites and Institutional Identity: The Ṣaqāliba of the Fatimid Caliphate*
2. Moritz Raum (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg) *A multi-facetted Supra-Identity – 'Ethiopians' and People of Colour in Byzantium*
3. Marlee Merson (Independent, formerly UoE) *Caretakers of the Body and the Soul: Women, Hospitals and Community Identity in Fifteenth-Century France*
4. Maha Shawki (University of Liège) *Writing the Self in Times of Institutional Shift: Patronage and Centralization in the Mamluk-Ottoman Transition in Cairo*

11:00-11:30 Break

11:30-13:00 Panel 2: **Institutions in the Byzantine Provinces: A Case Study** (Chair: Yannis Stouraitis)

1. Nila Namsechi (Independent, previously University of Birmingham) *Institutional Transformation and Elite Authority in the Duchy of Naples in the Early Middle Ages*
2. Vasileios Brentas (European University of Cyprus; Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) *From Enemy to Roman: Byzantine Administrative and Ecclesiastical Institutions as Mechanisms of Identity Transformation in Conquered Bulgaria (1018–1025)*
3. Madi Ibrahim (Centre d'Études Diplomatiques et Stratégiques (CEDS)) *The Thematic Institution in Byzantine Anatolia: Imposing and Negotiating Provincial Roman Identities (7th–11th Centuries)*

13:00-14:00 Lunch Break

14:00-15:45 Panel 3: **Constructing Counter-Identities** (Chair: Lucy Grig)

1. Thijs Kersten (Independent, formerly Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen and visiting student UoE) *The Pagans Have Come (Again): Popular Theology and Associative Memory in 4th-century Milan*
2. Karolina Tomczyszyn (KU Leuven) *Expressing Identity through Literary Curation: Letters as a Source for the Institutionalisation of the Syriac Orthodox Church (7th–8th c.)*
3. Kevser Gul (Boğaziçi University) *The Imperial Institution and the Making of Oppositional Identity in George of Pelagonia's Life of John III Vatatzes*
4. Daiki Sano (UoE) *Silence as Kaiserkritik in Historiography: The Case of George Pachymeres in Late Byzantium*

15:45-16:15 Break

16:15-17:15 **Keynote Lecture: Professor Andrew Peacock (University of St Andrews): *Empire, institutions and identity in the medieval Islamic world***

17:15-18:15 Reception

18:15 Dinner

Second Day (19/05):

9:00-10:30 Panel 4: **Translocality and Frontiers** (Chair: Rik Janssen)

1. Aysha Narmanova (Karadeniz Technical University) *Religion or Identity?: Impact of religion on the identity of the Caucasian Albanians* Online
2. Cihan Şimşek (Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University; University of Szeged) *Institutional Identities in the Early Medieval Mounted Pastoral Nomadic Political Ecumene: Khazar Brokerage and Magyar Transformation in a Multi-Core Model* Online
3. Shawn Cheng (UoE) *Maritime Institutions and Merchant Identities: How institutions and merchants fulfilled the goals of polities in the maritime space in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century*

10:30-11:00: Coffee and Tea Break

11:00-12:45 Panel 5: **Institutions and Space** (Chair: Lucas Butler)

1. Seyed Salam Fathi (University of Catania) *Kufic Epigraphy and Institutional Identity in Norman Sicily and the Byzantine World (10th to 13th Centuries)* Online
2. Sotiris Sotiriou (University of Warsaw) *Shaping Religious Identities in the City: Sainthood and Urban Hagiography in Tenth-Century Constantinople*
3. Nihan Zorlu Başel (Istanbul Technical University) *Authority Spaces in the Pontic Countryside: Monastic Power and Rural Spatial Organisation in Maçka* Online
4. Antonie Brenne (Independent, previously University of Oxford) *Religious Identities and Agency Beyond Institutions: The Zodiac in Synagogues*

12:45-13:45 Lunch Break

13:45-15:15 Panel 6: **Rulership and Kingship** (Chair: Will Higgins)

1. Zorana Cvijanović (Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen) *A Crowd of One: The Masculine Other in a Byzantine Reading of Trajan's Justice* Online|
2. Ankur Desval Fehrani (University of Cambridge) *Idea of the Central Islamic Imamate and Alexander's Election to Kingship in Jami's Khirad-Nāma-ye Iskandarī*
3. Zhang Chenlin (Peking University, visiting student UoE) *Consul aut Augustus: Clovis and the Blurring of Roman Political Titles*

15:15-15:45 Break

15:45-17:30 Panel 7: **Intellectual and Creative Articulations of Identity** (Chair: Niels Gaul)

1. Cristina Cocola (Independent, previously Ghent University; KU Leuven) *Modelling the Penitent Soul: Byzantine Katanyktic Poetry as an Institutional Tool for Identity Formation* Online
2. Luca Melis (University of Cagliari) *The Religion of Λόγος: Himerius and His Rhetoric School as a Mystery Community*
3. Mohamed Ahmed Taher Abdelrahman Elnakep (Mansoura University) *Al-Azhar as an Institutional Identity: Continuity and Transformation from the Mamluk Era to Modern Egypt*
4. Erdinç Yalınkılıç (Baskent University State Conservatory) *Institutional Contexts of Musical Knowledge in Late Byzantium: Harmonic Science and Psaltic Authority across Scholarly and Ecclesiastical Worlds*

17:30 Closing Statement

Abstracts

Thomas McBarron (University of St Andrews): ***Enslaved Elites and Institutional Identity: The Ṣaqāliba of the Fatimid Caliphate***

The ṣaqāliba of the Ismaili-Shia Fatimid caliphate (909–1171 CE) were prominent enslaved military and political actors driving Fatimid expansion in tenth-century North Africa, culminating in the conquest of Egypt and the founding of Cairo by the ṣaqlabī general Jawhar. While their importance has been recognised, the identities of these enslaved Europeans, designated by Arabic authors as "ṣaqāliba," remain misunderstood; modern scholarship translates ṣaqāliba as "Slavs," projecting rigid modern ethnic categories onto medieval Arabic sources.

Instead, ṣaqāliba was an imposed identity which transformed upon contact with Fatimid politico-military institutions. In Islamic geography "ṣaqāliba" functioned as a broad ethnonym describing individuals throughout Europe. Upon the transportation of individuals from these regions to North Africa, the term was reconfigured within the Fatimid institutional framework to denote an elite enslaved status shaped by the roles these individuals performed in service of the Fatimid caliph. Within this setting the ṣaqāliba dominated high-ranking military and administrative positions, and through these individuals the early Fatimid institutional apparatus was effectively constructed.

Paradoxically, despite filling elite roles, "ṣaqāliba" was an imposed identity articulating an enslaved group whose roles were defined by the Fatimid state and shaped by the volatile politico-social environment of North Africa, which precipitated the need for a more reliable enslaved administrative body. Thus, our understanding of this group is largely limited to the etic perspective through which sources constructed their identity.

While scholarship has reduced these individuals to the one-dimensional beings sources describe, complex motivations for the service of the ṣaqāliba to the caliphImam can nevertheless be traced. Caliphal favour, achieved by ṣaqāliba performing their imposed roles as caliphal agents, provided access to caliphally distributed property rights, from which significant income could be reaped. Competition over such property was a key preoccupation of the ṣaqāliba and reveals the economic incentives underpinning participation in Fatimid institutional structures.

Moritz Raum (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg) ***A multi-facetted Supra-Identity – 'Ethiopians' and People of Colour in Byzantium***

Folio 107 of the so-called Menologion of Basil II features an illustration of Philip the Evangelist conversing with a man of a much darker complexion. This scene, the Conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8), is emblematic for early Christian missionary activity at large. The historic use of the term 'Ethiopian' (from Greek aithíops 'burnt face') is descriptive rather than tied to a specific ethnicity and can, in some part, be compared to the modern 'Person of Colour'. However, since this identity was seldom chosen by the individuals in question, it is decidedly institutional in nature. Nonetheless, in a similar illustration from the

Theodore Psalter in the British Library (as well as some other Byzantine manuscripts), the Ethiopian Eunuch is depicted with fair skin, which seems contradictory to his very name.
This is far from the only inconsistency regarding this term's use in different contexts. Its meaning is not simply changing over time, it is constantly being expanded upon, resulting in diverse religious, gender, or class-based aspects and centuries-old traditions being added and conflated. Rather than describing a specific identity, the 'Ethiopian' is more of an amalgamation of different, sometimes even opposing, identities. Instead of focusing on a particular institution and how it (re)shaped certain identities, this paper's aim is to look at the supra-identity that is the 'Ethiopian' and from there, retrace the different institutions that have influenced it. These range from ancient Greek geography – education as a cultural institution in the broadest sense – to religious and political institutions like the church or the imperial court. Since the discussion has so far largely been limited to (medieval) Western European perspectives, this paper (as part of an ongoing master's dissertation) aims to contribute to the diversification of research by shedding light on the
Byzantine approaches to written and visual culture.

Marlee Merson (Independent, previously UoE): ***Caretakers of the Body and the Soul: Women, Hospitals and Community Identity in Fifteenth-Century France***

Hospitals played a crucial role in meeting the religious needs of French Christian communities in the late fifteenth-century in life and at death. They fostered an intersection between community identity, patronage of art, and the salvation of one's soul through a male-authored lens which imposed few roles upon women in their walls.
In this talk, we will explore the role of caretaker of the body and soul at death imposed upon three women in late medieval France. To meet the physical and spiritual needs of their communities, as well as perform their gendered duty, Lady Isabeau de Roubaix and Guigogne de Salins established the Hôpital Sainte Élisabeth de Roubaix and the Hôtel-Dieu de Beaune respectively. We will explore how they established these institutions, commissioned material culture to facilitate meditation, and prepared their contemporaries for death. We will then consider Sister Anne la Routye - a nun who worked within the Hôtel-Dieu de Paris and provides us with valuable insight into the holistic practice of women within French Medieval hospitals.

Maha Shawki (University of Liège) ***Writing the Self in Times of Institutional Shift: Patronage and Centralization in the Mamluk-Ottoman Transition in Cairo***

This paper investigates the transformation of religious institutions and their possible impact on scholarly identity in Cairo during the transition from late Mamluk toOttoman rule (1517). By conducting a comparative analysis of two scholarly autobiographies, the study explores how the shift from a Sultanate to a peripheral provenance was reflected in the social and professional self-conception of the ulama. The two autobiographies that will be explored belong to the famous scholars: the late Mamluk traditionist al-Sakhāwī (d. 1497) and the early Ottoman Sufi al-Shaʿrānī (d. 1565).
The study analyzes the autobiographies as products of the contrasting institutional patronage. Building on Carl Petry's research on the rise of academic rivalry and competition in the Late Mamluk elite, I examine

how al-Sakhāwī's autobiography, Irshād al-ghāwī, addressed the struggles over positions.In an environment of unstable waqf (endowment) appointments and perceived "corruption" described by Jonathan Berkey, I will explore how al-Sakhāwī's autobiography contained multiple representations of his life in an effort to leave a more balanced legacy. In contrast, al-Shaʿrānī's autobiography, Laṭāʾif al-minan was written under anemerging synthesis of Sufi authority under the Ottoman sovereignty.
Drawing on Helen Pfeifer's research into the "imperial salons" of the early modern era, this study analyzes how al-Shaʿrānī was affected by the new Ottoman standards of "gentility"and sociability. As the Ottoman era necessitated a "communal mediation" between the new rulers and the Egyptian populace, a process highlighted by Michael Winter and Doris Behrens-Abouseif, al-Shaʿrānī's self portrayed will be examined to trace the shifts toward spirituality in the broader Ottoman Empire. By examining the themes of centralized institutional legal hierarchies, endowment reorganization, and Suif influence, this paper will demonstrate how these structural changes are reflected in each scholar's self-image and their relationship to power.

Nila Namsechi (Independent, previously University of Birmingham) ***Institutional Transformation and Elite Authority in the Duchy of Naples (7th–10th Centuries)***

The reconquest of Italy under Justinian and the subsequent reorganisation of Byzantine administration initiated significant institutional change across the peninsula. In the Duchy of Naples, the seventh to tenth centuries witnessed the gradual replacement of the late Roman senatorial order by a militarised secular elite alongside the expansion of episcopal authority in urban governance. This paper examines how these developments reshaped political and economic structures and argues that elite authority in Naples emerged through the structural interdependence of secular and ecclesiastical institutions.
Drawing on papal correspondence, charters, Cassiodorus's Variae, and selected sigillographic and epigraphic evidence, the study analyses the transformation of local administration after the Gothic War and its implications for the duchy. It first traces the rise of a military aristocracy embedded in civil office and increasingly defined by landownership. It then examines cooperation between secular and ecclesiastical elites in estate management and agrarian organisation, demonstrating how control over land, dependent tenures, and legal jurisdiction formed the material basis of authority. These economic developments are considered alongside changes in urban government, particularly the growing civic role of bishops following the decline of earlier municipal institutions. Rather than representing institutional displacement, the interaction between ducal and episcopal authority produced a mutually reinforcing configuration of power that shaped both the agrarian system and the urban fabric of Naples.
By situating the duchy within wider Byzantine transformations, this paper shows how institutional restructuring generated new and durable forms of elite authority. Naples thus provides a case study of how overlapping institutions actively shaped political order and communal structures in the early medieval Mediterranean.

Vasileios Brentas (European University of Cyprus; Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) ***From Enemy to Roman: Byzantine Administrative and Ecclesiastical Institutions as Mechanisms of Identity Transformation in Conquered Bulgaria (1018–1025)***

The Byzantine conquest of the First Bulgarian state by Basil II in 1018 is considered a pivotal event for the Empire as the Balkans returned to imperial control, ending a long and intense war against the Bulgarians. Nevertheless, Basil demonstrated remarkable political flexibility and pragmatism toward the conquered population. Rather than implementing oppressive policies of Hellenization and subjugation, he established administrative and ecclesiastical institutions, promoting a peaceful integration of the Bulgarians into the Empire. This paper examines how the central authority used these institutions to foster imperial loyalty rather than national homogeneity, accommodating local realities.

A pivotal institutional actor in this smooth integration of the Balkans into Byzantium was the autocephalous Archbishopric of Ohrid established by Basil in 1019, to which he granted extensive privileges. The emperor recognized and institutionalized the Bulgarian ecclesiastical hierarchy, appointing a Bulgarian cleric as its first archbishop. In doing so, he accommodated and fulfilled the local population's demand for autonomy from the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, placing the archbishop under the emperor's direct authority. Imperial cohesion was primarily secured through the shared Orthodox faith and the empire's acceptance of linguistic differences. This ecclesiastical integration operated alongside secular administrative measures. High-ranking court titles were granted to the Bulgarian aristocracy, systematically sorting them into the hierarchy of Constantinople. Furthermore, Basil's pragmatic retention of the pre-existing tax system (collecting taxes in kind) demonstrates a deliberate tolerance of "overlapping institutions."

Through sigillographic, legal, and prosopographical evidence, this paper illustrates how the empire's administrative and ecclesiastical apparatus spatially transcended its traditional borders. Ultimately, this study highlights how institutions in the Byzantine empire actively constructed new identities. By accommodating local structures within an imperial ecumenical framework, the Byzantine state fostered a systemic solidarity that secured the Balkan frontier, offering a compelling model of medieval institutional identity formation.

Madi Ibrahim (Centre d'Études Diplomatiques et Stratégiques (CEDS)) ***The Thematic Institution in Byzantine Anatolia: Imposing and Negotiating Provincial Roman Identities (7th–11th Centuries)***

The thematic system (themata), established in the mid-7th century amid the crises of Late Antiquity, represented one of the Byzantine Empire's most enduring institutional innovations. By combining military command with civil administration and tying soldier-farmers (stratiotai) to land grants in Anatolia, the themes fundamentally reshaped provincial society. This paper examines how the thematic institution actively imposed and fostered a distinct provincial Roman identity among its inhabitants, framing them as "Romans" (Rhomaioi) bound by shared military obligations, local solidarity, and defense against external threats, particularly Arab incursions.

Drawing on primary sources such as the De Administrando Imperio of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, Theophanes the Confessor, and imperial legislation, alongside modern scholarship (e.g., John Haldon on the system's military-administrative evolution and Anthony Kaldellis on Roman continuity), the analysis highlights the dynamic process: the themes imposed occupational and class-based identities through land tenure and service requirements, while simultaneously generating communal solidarities that reinforced a

nested provincial Romanness within the broader imperial framework. Yet these identities were not static; they responded to central imperial pressures, occasional rebellions (e.g., in themes like Opsikion), and local adaptations, sometimes creating sites of resistance or negotiation against Constantinople's authority. Crucially, thematic identities transcended their originating institution both spatially—extending across Anatolia's frontier zones—and temporally, influencing post-11th-century provincial loyalties even after the system's partial decline following Manzikert (1071). By exploring this intersection in Byzantine Anatolia, the paper contributes to understanding overlapping institutions and fragmented identities in the transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, underscoring the thematic system's role in sustaining Roman communal self-perception amid geopolitical fragmentation.

Thijs Kersten (Independent, previously Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen and visiting student UoE) ***The Pagans Have Come (Again): Popular Theology and Associative Memory in 4th-century Milan***

In March of 387 CE, Roman troops occupied the Basilica Portiana in Milan. Some days later, a crowd marched to the site and started chanting. Ambrose, the presiding bishop, claimed not to have been involved. He merely, that same morning, had taught them a new psalm in Church. It was Psalm 79: "God, the Pagans have invaded your heritage! They have defiled your temple! They have reduced Jerusalem to rubble!" and so on. His teaching struck a chord. Through the act of collective singing, the soon-to-be-protestors associated themselves and the occupation of their holy site with the memory of the Israelites in the distant Biblical past. This process of 'associative memory' fuelled their identity as righteous Christians and motivated their protest action. At the core of all these processes stood their interpretation of the psalm.
This contribution studies how Ambrose's institutional knowledge (i.e. psalm exegesis) was received by the popular crowd and, in turn, shaped their memory, group identity, and protest action. First, it shows that psalmody became increasingly common and politicised in 4th-century Church services, amid inter-Christian conflict. This made the teaching of psalms, as done by Ambrose, a political instrument. Second, it maps the exegetical tradition for Psalm 79 in all extant Jewish and Christian exegesis from the 1st century BCE to the early 5th century CE. Third and final, it combines these insights as a new method to reconstruct the possible interpretation(s) of Psalm 79 at Milan and grasp its effect on group mentality, memory and identity. In doing so, this study hopes to shed light on the spread of institutional knowledge, to illustrate its impact on subaltern identities and memories, and to test a new methodology for approaching popular theology.

Karolina Tomczyszyn (KU Leuven) ***Expressing Identity through Literary Curation: Letters as a Source for the Institutionalisation of the Syriac Orthodox Church (7th–8th c.)***

The Syriac Orthodox Church is an ecclesiastical body that began to take shape in the aftermath of the doctrinal conflicts surrounding the Council of Chalcedon in 451. However, it was only in the 7th and 8th centuries that the Church both established its ecclesiastical structures and codified its theological doctrines, trying to secure its place in a multireligious society.
The largely unpublished and underresearched corpus of letters produced by three prominent

intellectuals of the Church: Jacob of Edessa (d. 708), George, bishop of the Arabs (d. 724), and John of Litarb (d. 737/8), offers a novel point of view on the institutionalisation of the Syriac Orthodox Church at the turn of the 8th century.
In my paper, I will explore one aspect of establishing institutional identity as attested in those letters, that is, the creation of their own, anti-Chalcedonian literary canon. The epistolary corpus of Jacob, George, and John shows an exceptional interest in the curation of Syriac literary culture, both earlier and contemporaneous. This interest is expressed through several tangible practices present in the letters: 1) analysing the attribution of certain works; 2) investigating the identity of the authors; 3) interpreting difficult passages; and 4) compiling the excerpts from various authors. Through a detailed analysis of several case studies, I will argue that the process of establishing an anti-Chalcedonian literary canon played a prominent role in the formation of Syriac Orthodox identity at the turn of the 8th century.

Kevser Gul (Boğaziçi University) ***The Imperial Institution and the Making of Oppositional Identity in George of Pelagonia's Life of John III Vatatzes***

Imperial authority was the central institution shaping political identity in Byzantium, yet moments of dynastic crisis could also expose the fragility of this institution and generate new forms of oppositional identification. In the aftermath of Michael VIII Palaiologos' usurpation of the Byzantine throne in 1258, the imperial institution itself became the object of intense reflection and criticism. This crisis did not simply provoke political opposition; it also stimulated new forms of identity formation centered on the memory of the displaced Laskarid dynasty. This paper examines how such criticism contributed to the formation of new political identities is reflected in the Life of John III Vatatzes the Merciful (Βίος τοῦ ἁγίου Ἰωάννου βασιλέως τοῦ ἐλεήμονος) attributed to George of Pelagonia.
Rather than simply commemorating the Nicaean emperor, the narrative offers a sustained reflection on the nature of imperial authority and the conditions under which it can be considered legitimate. By foregrounding the ethical responsibilities of the ruler, the text implicitly raises questions about the dynastic mechanisms through which imperial power was transmitted. In this context, the usurpation of the Laskarid throne becomes more than a political event; it becomes a point of reflection on the imperial institution itself. As a result, loyalty to the memory of the Laskarid rulers emerged as a form of political identification, through which individuals and groups expressed their dissatisfaction with the current order.
By reading George of Pelagonia's narrative as a commentary on the imperial institution, this paper argues that opposition to dynastic succession was generated within a form of identity rooted in the critique of contemporary imperial authority itself.

Daiki Sano (UoE) ***Silence as Kaiserkritik in Historiography: The Case of George Pachymeres in Late Byzantium***

Silence—the deliberate omission of events—is a ubiquitous yet often overlooked dimension of pre-modern historiography. Historians exercised selectivity in their narratives for a variety of reasons, including authorial design, patronal sensitivities, and political caution. Yet silence could also function as a sophisticated

instrument of political critique, enabling historians to pass judgement on those in power without risking overt confrontation. This paper examines one such case: the use of silence as a form of Kaiserkritik by the late Byzantine historian George Pachymeres (1242–c. 1310). Writing under the reign of Andronikos II (r. 1282–1328), Pachymeres was acutely aware of the empire's progressive decline, yet his senior positions in both the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the imperial court precluded overt criticism of the sovereign. Nevertheless, he sought to convey to his readers how what he terms 'current upheaval and confusion' (*νῦν ἀνατροπὴ καὶ σύγχυσις*) had come about from a former age of security and stability. To this end, he employed a variety of indirect and subtle strategies to undermine the emperor's public image. One such strategy was the selective suppression of events: by passing over certain imperial actions in silence, Pachymeres created the impression that the emperor had failed to act where action would have been expected of him, thereby diminishing his efforts and achievements. This paper explores how Pachymeres negotiated the tension between his institutional roles—as a senior ecclesiastical and court official—and his authorial identity as a political critic, arguing that the very constraints imposed by his institutional positions shaped his distinctive mode of historiographical dissent.

Aysha Narmanova (Karadeniz Technical University) ***Religion or Identity?: Impact of religion on the identity of the Caucasian Albanians***

Caucasian Albania existed in the South Caucasus from the 4th century BC to the 8th century AD. The adoption of Christianity in Albania took place in two stages. In the first stage, the attempts of the apostles of Jesus to spread Christianity were relatively unsuccessful, while in the second period Christianity was accepted as the official state religion in Albania.

There were some different consequences in adoption of Christianity. First of all, according to the information provided by ancient historians (Strabo), 26 different tribes speaking different languages lived in Albania. In the Late Antique period, this picture was more or less the same. In this sense, the adoption of a new monotheistic religion such as Christianity in the region also meant the unification of these tribes under the name of Christianity. At the same time, considering the geographical location of Caucasian Albania, under the influence of the Sasanians Zoroastrianism, and under the influence of Rome and later Byzantium, a number of differences within Christianity (Monophysite/Dyophysite) manifested themselves.

This article will discuss the effects of Christianity on Albanian ethnic identity and to what extent other religions altered these effects. The methodology used in the article is the comparative analysis of written sources of the period.

Clearly, the participation of Albanians in a number of resistances of the three South Caucasian peoples in the 5th century against the religious pressures of the Sasanians, and even the rebellion related to the Albanian king Vache II accepting Christianity rather than Zoroastrianism despite his kinship ties with the Sasanians, is in fact an example of the influence of Christianity on ethnic identity. As a result, due to the unifying power of Christianity and its influence on identity, the Albanians were able to preserve their identity even after the spread of Islam in this region.

Cihan Şimşek (Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University; University of Szeged) ***Institutional Identities in the Early Medieval Mounted Pastoral Nomadic Political Ecumene: Khazar Brokerage and Magyar Transformation in a Multi-Core Model***

This paper rethinks early medieval steppe politics in Europe by translating Janet L. Abu-Lughod's multicore critique of single-center world-systems into a model for social differentiation within mounted pastoral nomadic polities. Abu-Lughod argues that the Eurasian exchange system around 1250–1350 contained several interacting cores and that systemic change is best read as restructuring rather than as linear rise and fall. This move also complicates Immanuel Wallerstein's tripartite core–semiperiphery–periphery hierarchy, which presumes stable centres. I use this heuristic to analyse the Mounted Pastoral Nomadic Political Ecumene (c. 750–1050) as a relational field structured by mobility, corridor control, and tributary extraction.

I identify two European cores that repeatedly organized hierarchy and access. The first lies in the Khazar Khaganate sphere around the lower Volga River and the Don River–Volga approaches. Here, customs gates, fortified nodes, and market hubs concentrated brokerage and fiscal power. They fostered elite strata that policed routes and that converted tribute and tolls into political authority.

The second lies in the Carpathian Basin. It attracted successive nomadic polities from the Huns to the Avars and later to the conquering Hungarians. It enabled them to transform seasonal mobility into territorial leverage against neighbouring kingdoms and empires. The Magyar case tests the model. Ninth-century evidence places Magyar groups within Khazar–Hungarian entanglements and under varying degrees of Khazar political influence. After 895, the move into the Carpathian Basin created conditions for a western core built on raiding circuits and frontier bargaining. The defeat at Lechfeld in August 955 curtailed that bid. It redirected differentiation inward and it accelerated the shift toward territorial rulership.

Methodologically, the paper combines comparative source criticism with network and corridor modelling. It offers a vocabulary for comparing differentiation regimes without presuming a single European pathway.

Shawn Cheng (UoE) ***Maritime Institutions and Merchant Identities: How institutions and merchants fulfilled the goals of polities in the maritime space in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century***

This paper argues that within the maritime space of the Indian Ocean from the late thirteenth to early fourteenth century, government institutions promoted maritime trade to the political and economic benefit of the polities they were serving. Furthermore, maritime commerce was the conduit through which said institutions and related communities functioned. Cross-comparison across them reveals the malleability of the identities of merchants and the non-conformity of labels denoting identity.

The paper begins with the case study of Abu Ali and Taqi al-Din, both in direct service of the rulers of Ma'bar on the southeastern coast of India, belonging to merchant families. The former was in Ma'bar since before 1281 to 1291, the latter present since at least before 1293. The paper argues that both figures fulfilled similar functions, one succeeding the other, hinting at an institution behind their position, promoting trade for the Ma'bar rulers.

The paper then looks at the maritime-oriented government institutions of the Yuan Dynasty and Rasulid Sultanate. In the former, the Quanfusi institutionalized the activities of ortagh merchants serving the Mongol ruling family; merchants like Abu Ali were involved in diplomacy and trade for the political and economic goals of Yuan rulers. In the latter, a network of religious figures and important merchants, such as Taqi al-Din, received benefactions from the Rasulid treasury to the politico-religious and economic benefit of the Sultanate. Not only did these institutions have economic aims, they also depended on maritime commerce to fulfil their purpose.
Finally, comparing the merchants in service of the aforementioned polities reflects the malleability of identity in front of pragmatic benefits, regardless of affinity to institution or polity. Cross-comparing the Arabic, Persian and Chinese sources also reveal that labels denoting identity were employed in a way intimately related to the "labeller", inconsistent and inaccurate of the "labelled".

Seyed Salam Fathi (University of Catania) ***Kufic Epigraphy and Institutional Identity in Norman Sicily and the Byzantine World (10th to 13th Centuries)***

Between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, Kufic and Pseudo-Kufic script appeared with remarkable consistency across Byzantine churches, royal garments, palace decorations, and luxury objects throughout the medieval Mediterranean. The extent to which Christian institutions deliberately adopted this script as an instrument of institutional identity construction, rather than as a passive ornament, remains insufficiently examined in existing scholarship. This study addresses that gap by arguing that both the Norman court of Sicily and Byzantine ecclesiastical and imperial patrons employed Kufic epigraphy as a deliberate visual strategy through which authority was projected, cultural boundaries were negotiated, and institutional identities were constructed in ways that drew their power precisely from the blurring of religious and political distinctions. The research employs a comparative visual and historical analysis of selected case studies drawn from both contexts, examining epigraphic programs in royal ceremonial spaces, church decoration, and portable luxury objects.
Through this analysis, the study investigates how different institutional actors made informed and purposeful choices about the deployment of Arabic script forms across a range of media and geographic settings. The findings indicate that the boundary between authentic Kufic inscription and ornamental Pseudo-Kufic imitation was not a fixed distinction but a culturally constructed threshold whose negotiation was central to the identity-making strategies of medieval institutions. The appropriation of Kufic script in these contexts thus reflects not artistic ignorance or superficial borrowing but a purposeful visual practice through which courts, churches, and workshop traditions actively shaped institutional identities in the multilingual and multi-confessional societies of the medieval Mediterranean.

Sotiris Sotiriou (University of Warsaw) ***Shaping Religious Identities in the City: Sainthood and Urban Hagiography in Tenth-Century Constantinople***

This paper examines the transformation of sainthood as an institution in tenth-century Constantinople through three hagiographical texts: the Lives of Andrew the Fool, Basil the Younger,

and Irene of Chrysobalanton. It asks how the institution of sainthood was reconfigured in relation to the urban environment and how changing attitudes toward the city shaped models of holy life. Moving beyond earlier models of holiness centered on remote asceticism, these Lives situate sanctity within the urban environment, showing how sainthood was adapted to engage directly with the city and its inhabitants.

The saints traverse streets, churches, and marketplaces, interacting with ordinary residents and local communities. Andrew the Fool enacts holiness through paradoxical public behavior, making sanctity visible within the rhythms of urban life. Basil the Younger conveys prophetic authority addressing the moral and spiritual concerns of Constantinopolitan society. Irene exemplifies monastic holiness that connects her community with broader urban and social networks. Together, these texts demonstrate that sanctity was not only a personal or monastic ideal but also an institution that the authors sought to apply to the urban context, creating a model of holy life and shaping religious identities, which the authors adapted to the urban context through interactions between space, community, and practice.

To highlight these differences, the author compares the three Lives to earlier hagiographical texts, where sanctity was typically located in remote monastic or ascetic settings. Even when events in earlier texts occurred in urban environments, they carried a very different meaning and rarely engaged directly with the social and spatial dynamics of the city. This comparison shows how the tenth-century Lives reconfigure the institution of sainthood for urban contexts, making holiness socially visible and embedded within the rhythms of city life. Together, they illustrate how hagiography could transform sainthood into a dynamic, urban-centered institution.

Nihan Zorlu Başel (Istanbul Technical University) ***Authority Spaces in the Pontic Countryside: Monastic Power and Rural Spatial Organisation in Maçka***

While monastic studies have primarily focused on major monastic centres in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, and Western Europe, the monastic landscapes of the Pontic region have received comparatively less attention. Some monastic institutions, through their economic, social, and spatial connections, maintained their influence beyond the Middle Ages into the Modern Period. In this context, the study concentrates on Maçka, one of the few settlements in the Pontic region under Ottoman rule where the non-Muslim population remained around 76% until the early 20th century.1 The study examines the regional influence of three major monasteries (Vazelon, Sümela, and Kuştul), analysing the sources of their influence and how they shaped local society through rural spatial relationships. Trade routes connecting to the Port of Trabzon, including those of the Silk Road, passed through the valleys of Maçka, and the monasteries' relationships with these routes strengthened their economic position. The monasteries formalised this economic strength through property relations, transforming it into a lasting presence. The survival of some acts from Vazelon provides primary data for understanding these relationships, especially from the 13th to the 15th centuries. The study reconstructs the monastic landscape of the Pontic countryside by integrating documentary evidence with spatial analysis of settlement patterns, topography, and transportation routes. The monastery–property–community relations derived from the Vazelon Acts are used to evaluate other monasteries in the region and to demonstrate that monastic institutions in the Pontic countryside were not

merely religious centres but institutions of authority that shaped regional spatial order through property relations and rural settlement organisation.

Antonie Brenne (Independent, previously University of Oxford) ***Religious Identities and Agency Beyond Institutions: The Zodiac in Synagogues***

The Zodiac, with its roots in Babylon of the 8th c. BC and its uses in astrology, strikes us as a symbol strongly tied to pagan identity, tradition, and belief. Why, then, do several synagogues dating to the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries AD from Roman Palestine depict the zodiac as the focal point of their religious mosaic decoration, placing it at the centre of mosaic decorations relating to Jewish traditions, teachings, and religious practices? Focusing on three such sites and their Zodiac depictions, I will show how and why the Zodiac motif is first integrated into the Jewish pictorial repertoire despite it clashing with Jewish religious scripture and teachings, how it is then accepted and spread, to be adapted as it becomes an engrained part of the religion's oral and written tradition.
This study will demonstrate the felt necessity of going beyond the bounds set by religious institutions by taking the Zodiac from pagan art, and legitimising it by anchoring it to Jewish teachings and the religion's exemplary past. This process of enabling the motif to become an accepted, engrained Jewish tradition in and of itself reflects on the central role played by religious institutions in communities of faith, and how moving beyond or around these institutions could be central to the development, self-identity and, crucially, perseverance of religious communities.

Zorana Cvijanović (Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen) ***A Crowd of One: The Masculine Other in a Byzantine Reading of Trajan's Justice***

The Legend of Emperor Trajan's Justice, according to which Pope Gregory the Great (pont. 590–604) posthumously baptised and liberated Trajan's soul from hell, was first written down in the eighth-century "Life of Gregory the Great" by an anonymous Whitby monk. The salvation of a 'pagan' emperor was both a topic of Christian admiration and a subject of doctrinal debate throughout the medieval Latin West, where it was rewritten and reimagined in multiple Latin and vernacular literary accounts. On the other hand, the Byzantine literary tradition concerned itself with the Legend within a single text, titled "On those who have died in the Faith" by (Pseudo)-John of Damascus, transmitted across the Greek East in over one hundred fifty manuscripts. Pseudo-Damascus' homily was a common feature in the Byzantine liturgy for All Souls Day, but the actual text is likely a late eighth-century forgery by Michael Synkellos (c. 760–846), who composed the homily as a response to the issue of Emperor Theophilus' salvation. My paper aims to explore the ecclesiastical reception of Emperor Trajan's justice in Byzantium, understood as an identity-forming "other" within the wider medieval reception of the legend. How did Michael Synkellos' fabrication impact the established identity of Trajan as a warrior emperor? In what ways did non-ecclesiastical institutions, such as the Byzantine imperial court and educational establishments, interpret, adopt, or resist the newly promoted imperial image? My focus will be on the changing ideas of warrior masculinity during the

Iconoclasm (726–843) and the Investiture Controversy (1076-1124) as socio-political catalysts through which the Byzantine otherness, that is, the Latin disparity of Trajan's identity, had developed.

Ankur Desval Fehrani (University of Cambridge) ***Idea of the Central Islamic Imamate and Alexander's Election to Kingship in Jami's Khirad-Nāma-ye Iskandarī***

As a part of the Persian tradition of writing Alexander epics, inspired from the Greek Pseudo-Callisthenes Alexander Romance tradition, Maulana Jami's KhiradNāma-ye Iskandarī (lit. The Alexandrine Book of Wisdom) marks an important injunction in this tradition. Completed in 1485, Jami's epic poem constitutes a literary response to Nizami's Iskandar-Nāma (lit. Alexandreid) dyad and Amir Khusrau's Ā'ina-ye Sikandarī (lit. Alexandrine Mirror). However, unlike his predecessors, Jami adds an interesting and novel episode to the old story of Alexander, where, instead of simply inheriting his kingship, Alexander is elected to the office of kingship by a vote of the wise sages.
In this paper, I argue that Jami takes inspiration from the ideals set by alMawardi (d. 1058) in his Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah (lit. Ordinances of the Government). While still being within the Islamic Golden Age, al-Mawardi's work showcases the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate, which he witnessed living through a period of progressive deterioration of social and political disintegration. Jami, I argue, adapts these concepts for the election of his epic hero to kingship, and reimagines an ideal king in troubled times. To the best of my knowledge, this aspect of Jami's work remains wholly unexplored, and with this paper, I hope to initiate a discussion on Jami's profound understanding of the central Islamic religious and political institutions.

Zhang Chenlin (Peking University, visiting student UoE) ***Consul aut Augustus: Clovis and the Blurring of Roman Political Titles***

In his Ten Books of Histories, Gregory of Tours describes Clovis wearing purple and a diadem, scattering coins, and being called tamquam consul aut augustus. Yet the index capitulorum of the work entitles this chapter De patriciato Chlodovechi regis. So we see three distinct Roman titles — patricius, consul, augustus — for one man in one circumstance.
Scholars have long debated the honours Clovis actually received from Emperor Anastasius that lay behind this story. This paper is less concerned with that question than with another: why could Gregory of Tours use these titles as if they were interchangeable, and what does this conflation tell us about institutional identities in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages?
For sixth-century senatorial writers such as Cassiodorus, consul and Augustus still stood for opposed principles — republican honour against imperial power — and no one versed in that tradition would have collapsed the two into a single phrase, still less conceptualised them as equivalent to the honour of patricius. This paper argues that the blurring of titles in Gregory's text became possible only after Emperors Justinian and Justin II absorbed consular authority into imperial prerogative. Gregory, writing after this institutional transformation, was no longer able meaningfully to distinguish these categories. Therefore, his writing may tell us little about what title(s) Clovis received in reality, but much about what late sixth-century Gaul had inherited from Roman institutions.

Cristina Cocola (Independent, previously Ghent University; KU Leuven) ***Modelling the Penitent Soul: Byzantine Katanyktic Poetry as an Institutional Tool for Identity Formation***

This paper explores the role of religious institutions in Byzantine society through the lens of katanyktic (penitential) poetry. While institutions are often studied through their administrative or legal structures, this study argues that the Byzantine Church and its monastic foundations actively shaped the internal and emotional identity of believers by institutionalising the language of contrition and repentance.

By examining a selection of katanyktic hymns from the Middle and Late Byzantine periods, I demonstrate that penitential hymnography did not merely offer a liturgical backdrop; it provided a rigorous framework for self-representation. Through the performance of these texts—whether sung in a communal monastic setting or read in private devotion—the institution mediated the individual's relationship with the divine and the self. I contend that the repetitive and performative nature of these poems functioned as a framework for emotional self-fashioning, smoothing and refining the believer's identity into a standardised model of the homo penitens.

Focusing on the intersection of institutional liturgy and personal affect, the paper will examine how compunction (katanyxis) encouraged by the Church served to align individual emotional responses with institutional expectations. These poems offered a powerful script for the self, allowing monks and laypeople alike to navigate their communal belonging through a shared vocabulary of sin and redemption. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how Byzantine religious institutions transcended physical boundaries, creating a "spatial and temporal" identity that persisted through the enduring influence of the penitential poetic tradition.

Luca Melis (University of Cagliari) ***The Religion of Λόγος: Himerius and His Rhetoric School as a Mystery Community***

Himerius was the head of one of the preeminent schools of rhetoric in fourth-century Athens. His students, who frequently immigrated to Athens from various regions, were highly diverse in terms of their ethnic backgrounds. Since the school's success also relied upon the creation of a cohesive community, Himerius employed various strategies to foster a sense of belonging and a shared identity among his students.

This paper argues that, among these strategies, we should include the rhetorician's persistent metaphorical alignment of his school with a mystery cult. This concept is rooted within a broader literary tradition, and appears also to have been shaped by Himerius' own biographical experiences, specifically his initiation into the Mithraic mysteries during his visit to Julian in Constantinople.

In Himerian metaphors, speeches were conceived as ritual sacrifices to Apollo and the Muses, and simultaneously as initiation rites to which newcomers were granted only gradual access. Indeed, this imagery is particularly recurrent in orations delivered before prospective students—individuals external to the community but on the verge of joining it. This recurrence demonstrates the function the allegory served: portraying the school as a unified, identity-driven community to those about to enter it.

The association between Himerius' school and a mystery cult proved highly functional, as it cultivated the students' perception of belonging to an exclusive and elite community. The "us" of those admitted to the sacred rites was juxtaposed against a "them" comprising everyone else. Finally, Himerius refers to various degrees of initiation, implicitly alluding to the superiority of his own school over its rivals in contemporary Athens.
This paper will provide a review and analysis of Himerian passages where this tòpos emerges, accompanied by a comparison with similar trends in contemporary and preceding orators. It will conclude with a reflection on the powerfully cohesive role guaranteed by these religious references.

Mohamed Ahmed Taher Abdelrahman Elnakep (Mansoura University) ***Al-Azhar as an Institutional Identity: Continuity and Transformation from the Mamluk Era to Modern Egypt***

Al-Azhar has functioned for over six centuries as one of the most influential religious, educational, and political institutions in the Islamic world. This paper examines how Al-Azhar has actively shaped and mediated institutional identities, both within its scholarly community and across the broader Egyptian and Muslim societies. Drawing on historical records from the Mamluk period through the Ottoman era to modern Egypt, the study analyzes the processes through which AlAzhar produced distinct religious, social, and political identities. The institution's curricula, hierarchical structures, and legal authority contributed to the formation of an enduring scholarly identity, while its interactions with political powers shaped broader societal perceptions of legitimacy and authority. At the same time, Al-Azhar provided avenues for resistance, negotiation, and adaptation, enabling members and affiliated communities to navigate competing political and religious frameworks. This paper argues that Al-Azhar's institutional identity exemplifies how a single pre-modern institution can generate overlapping, evolving identities that transcend temporal and spatial boundaries. By focusing on the continuity and transformation of Al-Azhar as an institution, this study contributes to our understanding of the complex relationship between institutional structures and identity formation in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, offering comparative insights for scholars studying other pre-modern societies. The analysis also highlights the relevance of Al-Azhar's institutional legacy for contemporary debates on religious authority, education, and identity in the Muslim world.

Erdinç Yalınkılıç (Baskent University State Conservatory) ***Institutional Contexts of Musical Knowledge in Late Byzantium: Harmonic Science and Psaltic Authority across Scholarly and Ecclesiastical Worlds***

Byzantine musical thought is often treated as a relatively unified intellectual tradition. This paper challenges this view by arguing that musical knowledge operated within distinct yet overlapping institutional contexts that include ecclesiastical, courtly, and scholarly environments. These contexts shaped the production, transmission, and validation of knowledge and practitioner identities. Focusing on late Byzantine Constantinople, the paper

identifies two frameworks defined by distinct epistemological priorities and modes of authority. On the one hand, harmonic science belonged to an intellectual environment associated with elite education and the reception of classical scientific traditions. Conversely, the theory and practice of psaltic chant were embedded in the liturgical practice of the Church while articulated within similarly educated circles.

The fourteenth-century scholar Manuel Bryennios, in his treatise Harmonika (c. 1300), engages with ancient authorities such as Ptolemy, Aristoxenus, and Nicomachus, presenting harmonic theory as part of a classical scientific tradition grounded in mathematics and philosophy. In this framework, harmonic science appears as learned knowledge connected to the educational culture of classical paideia. By contrast, the fifteenth-century imperial musician Manuel Chrysaphes, a lampadarios of the imperial clergy associated with court liturgical practice, articulates musical knowledge within an ecclesiastical framework in a treatise preserved in a manuscript dated to 1458 (MS Iviron 1120), focusing on performance and the pedagogical transmission of chant.

By juxtaposing these figures, the paper argues that harmonic science and psaltic theory correspond to distinct knowledge contexts producing different forms of musical authority. Working from a shared musical heritage, Bryennios and Chrysaphes demonstrate how institutional and intellectual environments shaped both the articulation of theory and its pedagogical aims. Late Byzantine musical thought thus emerges as a field structured by parallel systems of expertise, reflecting broader medieval configurations in which musical knowledge operated across scientific, liturgical, and symbolic domains rather than within a single epistemological model.

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