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New Approaches to Late Roman Political History

The format of these Committee on Ancient History sessions imposes the challenge of working out what one regards as the most important developments in the historical analysis of a given period -- which is actually less easy than it might seem for a period as lively as the later Roman empire. Even in the absence of any major discoveries of new evidence, new writing on late Roman politics shows no signs of abating. Rather than run through a wide range of different new approaches to the study of late Roman political history, I will focus on three themes which are, to my mind, of key importance. My printed abstract suggests that I had intended to begin with some discussion of the third-century crisis, a period still too little considered by imperial historians, for whom it is too alien, and late imperial historians, for whom it is too obscure. Recent research has suggested that the political breakdown of the third-century empire was in some ways an inevitable consequence of the social and constitutional structure of the Severan empire, but in setting out to write this paper, I discovered that I could not do even modest justice to so big a question. I will therefore turn instead to the second topic listed in my abstract, that of Constantine and conversion.

The reasons for, and nature of, Constantine's conversion continue to be debated, while the impact of Constantine's reign as a Christian emperor on the conversion of the imperial aristocracy has been the object of renewed interest. The latter topic can be left to our commentator, one of the chief experts on that subject. But the circumstances of Constantine's conversion have been illuminated recently by work that seems to have positively identified the source of Constantine's famous vision in the sky -- the sign that was eventually taken to

demonstrate the favour of the Christian God towards him. In an article first published in an obscure German Festschrift, Peter Weiss argued that we could precisely identify the type of celestial phenomenon that Constantine had seen as a solar halo, an identification which brings with it geographical and chronological consequences that in turn affect our understanding of Constantine's history. Solar haloes result from the refraction of the Sun through ice particles in the atmosphere. As became immediately clear from the colour images published along with an English translation of Weiss' article in the *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, solar haloes do indeed produce what looks like a cross above the Sun, sometimes, though not always, with a sprinkling of multiple, discrete small suns arranged along the lower edge of the solar orb. That is to say, the solar halo matches quite closely the description of the vision given in the latest more or less contemporary source for Constantine's vision, the *Vita Constantini* of Eusebius. In and of itself, of course, the mere identification of the celestial vision would be of no great importance. Scholars have rarely bothered to doubt that Constantine did really see something in the sky -- ancient people were always seeing signs in the sky, and finding significance in them -- so how much does it matter whether or not we know what sort of sign he saw? With the solar halo identified, however, we actually learn something new about the timing and historical circumstances of the imperial conversion.

Solar haloes are a rare phenomenon, but they occur with some regularity in the south of France. We have a fairly precise chronology of Constantine's movements in the years between 307 and 312, and we know more or less when he was in the region where solar haloes are prevalent. We also have three separate early sources for Constantine's activities as a visionary -- the so-called 'pagan vision' of Constantine, a vision of Apollo in the sky described in one of the *Panegyrici Latini* in 310; the description of the *labarum*, the Christian symbol, that came to the

emperor in a dream as recorded by Lactantius in 314 or so; and the elaborate description of vision and *labarum* retailed by Eusebius immediately after the emperor's death, but probably based on the aging Constantine's own description of the event. The contradictions among these sources -- pagan versus Christian, Lactantius' dream vision versus Eusebius' sign in the sky and so on -- have long been known and have often been used to impugn one or another of the sources. Alternatively, they have been taken to suggest Constantine's own inconsistency or perhaps mendacity. The solar halo, however, resolves the contradictions. We know that in the many campaigns that Constantine fought before his long campaign against Maxentius, several required him to march from the south of France north to the Rhine frontier. It was precisely on one of these campaigns that he, with his whole army, saw the vision in the sky which the panegyrist describes as a vision of Apollo. The place is right for a solar halo of the sort described in Eusebius many years later, while nothing in the imprecise description of the vision in the panegyric makes a solar halo impossible. In other words, Constantine's famous vision of the *labarum* and the vision of Apollo are one and the same. From the juxtaposition of these data, several points of historical significance emerge.

First, it becomes certain not just that Constantine did have a vision, but that it was vision shared by his whole army, and that it took place nearly two years before the victory of the Milvian Bridge over Maxentius. Secondly, it becomes clear that although the vision was immediately recognized as having taken place, its meaning was far from clear at the time. That is to say, the impression of instantaneity deliberately conveyed by Eusebius is false, though that does not mean that Eusebius is himself distorting the evidence: Constantine might well have rearranged or misremembered the chronology as time went by and the story was told again and again. The gap between the experience of the vision and the Italian campaign against Maxentius

means that there was a period in which the meaning of his vision was up for grabs, not just what it portended, but also the identity of the god who had sent it. Constantine, whom we know to have kept both Christian and pagan divines in his entourage, will have been some years in deciding which way to jump, after years of debate had fully canvassed Apolline, Christian and perhaps other interpretations. There is no reason that Constantine's final decision between the alternative interpretations of the sign in the sky should not have come in the dream described by Lactantius, but the absence of the vision from the account of Lactantius is now of less consequence:

Lactantius wrote in Licinius' half of the empire, very shortly after Constantine's victory in the West. The Christian symbol of Constantine's army, and the prayers they recited, were known to the East, but their origins were not. Weiss' new data may seem to be a point of mere detail, or at best an aid in distinguishing the value of our different sources. It is more important than that, however, for it resolves an interpretative crux that has exercised scholars running back to Jacob Burckhardt in the nineteenth century. If the sign which Constantine eventually interpreted as Christian was not just real, but also very widely seen by his army -- as was clearly the case given that the solar halo allows us to resolve the contradictions in the literary sources -- then the relative boldness of the emperor's decision to go into battle under the sign of the Christian god ceases to be a major question. Regardless of how widely worshipped the Christian god might have been -- regardless, that is, of whether Constantine was publicly embracing the faith of a large and powerful, or of a very small minority -- it was not a matter of personal taste being imposed upon an army. Much of the army had seen the sign in the sky and knew that it was real and what it looked like. To march against Maxentius under the *labarum* was not necessarily to march under the symbol of a Christian emperor, but rather that of a victorious emperor to whom the heavens spoke in full view of his men.

My second theme, and one of more general significance, is a matter of economic history and quite possibly the most significant new piece of research on the deep structures of the later empire for many decades. Jairus Banaji's *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity* (2nd ed., Oxford, 2006) introduces a controversial but plausible thesis about the role of gold in the late Roman economy, particularly from the very end of the Constantinian era. If correct, it has serious implications for the growing separation between eastern and western empires and the rise of a bureaucratic aristocracy in the East. Despite its plausibility, Banaji's thesis has not had anything like the impact or discussion it deserves, no doubt because the economics involved is very difficult to wrap one's head around. As a great many people all over the world have recently found out to their detriment, economics is something we ignore or fail to understand at our peril. So while I can't claim to be certain I've understood the whole of Banaji's argument, what I have gleaned from it strikes me as being a decisive interpretative insight into the late Roman empire and its fall.

Banaji begins from the demonstration that the contemporary documentation in the Egyptian papyri clearly shows that the *solidi* that appear in their texts are not a money of account, simply there to facilitate record-keeping. On the contrary, they represent actual coined gold, of the fixed weight and purity which helped make the currency so stable. These coins became the main currency of the empire at precisely the same time that it was becoming increasingly bureaucratized under the regimes of Constantine's children, particularly Constantius II. There were many more of these new bureaucrats than there had been in previous imperial regimes and they came from a wider social background than did the primarily senatorial administrators of the high empire. One of the ways they enforced the authority of the state, while also enriching themselves, was to insist upon the commutation of taxes-in-kind into taxes in the new coined

gold. There was, of course, nothing new in administrators using different forms of arbitrage to profiteer from the regions they administered (think of Cicero's *Verrines*), but the new system of the fourth century had some interesting features, in that the regime that insisted upon payment in coined gold was also the source that injected the gold for its payment into the economic system.

This gave the new bureaucratic elites a socially transformative power they would not otherwise have had. On the one hand, control of the means of economic interchange between state and society allowed the new imperial elite to shift landed wealth out of the hands of older municipal elites and into its own. On the other, privileged access to gold gave the new bureaucratic elite an incentive to support and maintain the system which enriched them. Their access to power vis-à-vis an older landed elite lay very much in their control of the taxation function of imperial government. Because they had few sources of power outside what they could extract by reason of their offices within the state, they had every reason to ensure that the state continued to function smoothly, because if the cycle of taxation, commutation and minting ran smoothly, so too did their own authority stand unchallenged. This model accounts very well for the gradual disappearance of the old curial landscape of the Greek East in the later fourth and particularly the fifth century, as new families from the imperial bureaucratic elite were able by means of access to gold to push out those who had long since been the arbiters of the Greek countryside. But it also helps explain why the Greek East faced a different fate in the fifth century than did the West. Banaji has enough evidence -- just enough -- to suggest that the same phenomenon of gold use was present in the West as in the East, if perhaps on a smaller scale. Yet as any number of other studies have shown, nothing suggests the same displacement of an old urban elite by a new imperial elite of *petits fonctionnaires*. Presumably this was because the old senatorial aristocracy, with its vast Italian and African estates, owned land on a scale that a new bureaucracy might pick

away at but could not displace. Senatorial resistance, whether passive or active, to a new imperial bureaucracy thus prevented the creation of a new elite completely invested in the perpetuation of the imperial system. That, in turn, meant that the western state became weaker and weaker by comparison to an eastern state that generated a self-perpetuating incentive to its survival. While that alone will not account for the inability of the western empire to survive in the fifth century, it will have played a major role, and that leads us to the third and final theme of this brief survey.

The balance between internal and external factors in the fall of the western empire is a perpetual topic of debate, but the past decade has seen a very pronounced reaction against the interpretative trend of the 1990s, which very much stressed the gradual Transformation of the Roman World, in place of a decisive fall of the empire, whether in 378, 410 or 455, 476 or perhaps 489 or later still. Many authors, particularly those working in the narrative rather than analytical mode, have attempted to reinstate barbarian invasion as the primary, or sometimes even the sole, cause of western collapse in the fifth century. The most popular version -- because retailed in colourful prose by Oxonian scholars of undoubtedly formidable intellect -- is simplicity itself: the Roman empire fell because the Huns killed it. Like the break-shot in pool, they sent Germanic tribes careening into the empire in 376-378 and again in 405-408; then Attila denuded the Roman treasury and exposed the weakness of the emperor's position; and then his death unleashed the tribes he had kept in check so that they finished the job begun a hundred years before. That the fifth century was catastrophical for standards of living across the western empire can only be denied by those wearing the most rose-tinted of glasses. But an analysis that relies wholly upon invasion by a foreign foe is barely an analysis at all.

For one thing, most of the armies that fought on western soil during the fifth century, whether commanded by barbarian or Roman generals, were made up of men who had lived on

Roman soil for at least two generations. That is, most the wars of the fifth-century West were not contests of foreigner and Roman, but rather civil wars within Roman provinces between competing factions. Some of these factions included or deployed foreigners; some included men of various foreign origins alongside men of various provincial origins. None can be broken down into simple dichotomies of barbarian and Roman, conqueror and collaborator, foreign victor and native vanquished. As importantly, even among the actual invaders of the fifth-century West, close neighbours of the empire predominated, neighbours who had lived for generations within the imperial shadow, effectively within an imperial commonwealth. Recent writers who insist upon centuries' long migrations from Vistula to Costa del Sol, do so in willful ignorance of the fact that every barbarian army that actually crossed the fifth-century *limes*, and every barbarian *gens* that set up shop on the soil of the western provinces, came not from some primeval Germanic forest, but from within a hundred kilometres of the *limes*. One need not like one's neighbours, but one generally understands their habits very well indeed, and so rather than looking for the irreducibly alien elements injected into the Roman state by foreign newcomers, we should instead look for other factors that might have been conducive to imperial collapse.

One such factor was no doubt the relative absence in the West of an elite dependent upon the smooth functioning of the state. Another, however, was the political rhetoric that dominated factional politics in the fourth century. The rhetoric of civilization and barbarism was not firmly linked to real ethnic and regional distinctions: in the fourth century, the dichotomy of Roman and barbarian could be deployed regardless of regional origins, and the rhetoric of barbarism was not automatically applicable to a person born outside the imperial frontiers. On the contrary, the rhetoric of barbarism was deployed in the factional and regional disputes of the period to construct its target as an outsider threatening to the imperial system. We discover a basic stability in fourth-century politics, wherein powerful leaders, civilian or military, jockeyed for power

within the state, using the same rhetoric of civilization and barbarism regardless of regional origins. Thus we cannot analyse late imperial politics as if there were a genuine distinction in the behaviour of those born outside the empire. Instead, fourth-century stability began to break down in the 390s, when some Roman officers realized that to be demonized as a barbarian by one's political enemies was not necessarily a handicap: it could in fact be a formidable weapon within the state, allowing people to take actions that had been unthinkable in a mid fourth-century context.

The general Alaric does, therefore, represent a turning point, but not because he led a gang of unassimilated savages who had never been integrated into Roman provincial society. Instead, Alaric was a turning point because he was able to recognize a hitherto unseen corollary of fourth-century political rhetoric: that there was an advantage to be had by playing out the stereotype of the barbarian. While still attempting to work within the imperial system and rise through the military ranks, he was simultaneously able step outside that role and threaten the government as an outsider. That, after all, was what barbarians had always been meant to do: in fact it's the script that Claudian wrote for Alaric. But no one before Alaric had seen that there might be a point in embracing the role. His doing so was hardly inevitable: after all, he was as far removed from the forests of Germania as was Magnentius, a successful usurper who was reimagined as a barbarian invader only after he stumbled on the battlefield. Alaric's coup was an imaginative one, and so novel that he himself could not, in the end, profit by it. But the utility of his approach was rapidly appreciated by those who followed him. The habit of stepping outside the imperial system and attacking it, in order to find a place in it, was adopted by every political figure of any consequence in the fifth-century West. Once the way had been shown by a man who, demonized as a barbarian, decided to do what no one had done before and act like one, the sheer utility of that approach made its widespread adoption inevitable. It also destroyed the

western empire: over several decades of soldiers jockeying for position within the imperial system by threatening to destroy it, the system itself ceased to be worth fighting for.