PART I

Christian–Muslim relations in history
PART IA

Beginnings
Late Antiquity is a term generally applied by modern historians to the period bridging classical antiquity and the early Middle Ages. The dates to which we may assign the term ‘late antique’ remain a topic of debate among historians, but they usually entail part or all of the period between the third and the eighth centuries (Brown 1989; Cameron 2011; Clark 2011).

Geographically, the term is generally employed in reference to the political, economic and social developments which occurred in Europe and the Mediterranean, although more recent studies have also incorporated discussions of Sassanian Persia and pre-Islamic Arabia within this broader framework. The particular concentration of studies on Europe and the Mediterranean has meant that the study of ‘Late Antiquity’ has tended to focus on developments which emerged in the Roman Empire following the third century.

### Shifting borders of the late antique world

The dominant political and cultural entity of the late antique Mediterranean was the Roman Empire which, at the beginning of Late Antiquity around 250, stretched from the borders of southern Scotland to the western margins of the Arabian Desert in what is now modern Jordan. Internal political and economic pressures, as well as the shifting relationship between Rome and its neighbours, saw a number of drastic changes to the organisation and extent of the Roman Empire during the period 300–600.

By the late third century, following a period of political and economic instability known as the ‘third century crisis’, the territories of the Roman Empire had been effectively divided between four emperors (known as a Tetrarchy, or rule of four), who each governed a separate region: two in the western empire, covering Britain, Gaul (France), Italy, North Africa and Spain, and two in the east, spanning Anatolia (modern Turkey), Egypt, Greece and Syria (Corcoran 2005; Hekster 2008; Potter 2013).

The tetrarchic arrangement, which was designed to ensure a more effective system of defence, was dissolved by the actions of the Emperor Constantine I in the early fourth century, whose military campaigns against his co-rulers culminated in him being crowned sole emperor over the reunified Roman Empire around 325 (Barnes 1981; Lenski 2005; Stephenson 2009). Besides the reunification of the Roman Empire, Constantine’s reign also oversaw the foundation of a new imperial capital in the newly established city of Constantinople (modern Istanbul), formerly a
small colony known as Byzantion. As the seat of imperial governance, Constantinople expanded rapidly to become, by the sixth century, the largest urban settlement of the late antique Mediterranean, and it was to remain the largest Christian urban centre throughout the early Middle Ages (Mango 1990; Magdalino 2002).

Constantine’s reunification of the Roman Empire into a single administrative unit, however, proved a less enduring legacy. Following the death of the Emperor Theodosios I in 395, the empire was once more divided into ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ territories, to be ruled separately by his two sons: Arcadius assumed control as emperor of the east (termed the East Roman Empire by modern historians), and Honorius became emperor in the west (termed the West Roman Empire) (Collins 1999: 47–60; Williams and Friell 1998).

Imperial control over both halves of the empire, which contemporaries still perceived as a unified entity, was subsequently administered by the separate rulers operating from two imperial courts: one in Constantinople and the other in Ravenna, Italy (Moorhead 2012: 39–42). This arrangement, designed for administrative expediency, lasted less than a century, for the collapse of the West Roman Empire, traditionally dated to 476, following the deposition of the Emperor Romulus Augustulus, effectively ended the system of centralised authority which had united the regions of Britain, Gaul, Italy, North Africa and Spain within a single political and cultural unit. In its place emerged a series of smaller successor kingdoms ruled by Germanic groups who had settled on the peripheries of the Roman Empire around a century earlier. The extent to which each of these emerging regimes were able to maintain existing Roman administrative and social customs varied considerably. Examination of post-Roman life in Gaul, Italy, North Africa and Spain has produced evidence for some continued maintenance of earlier systems. Britain, in contrast, appears to have witnessed a more rapid change from Roman norms (Esmonde Cleary 2013; Henning 2009; Ward-Perkins 2005).

The territories of the East Roman (also known as Byzantine) Empire following 476 were characterised by more long-term stabilities in Roman imperial control. By 500, the territories of the East Roman Empire, ruled from the imperial capital of Constantinople, extended over the areas of Greece, Anatolia, Syria-Palaestina and Egypt. The gradual transference of imperial government to Constantinople also shielded the eastern imperial administration from the collapse of imperial authority in the west.

In agricultural terms, the territories of the east were generally wealthier and more productive than their western counterparts and were therefore able to sustain larger populations and ensure a steady supply of tax revenue for the imperial state and army (Wickham 2005). More recent research into fifth- and sixth-century archaeological sequences in these regions has consistently confirmed this impression, producing evidence for continued investment in urban infrastructure (such as public monuments or water management) well into the sixth century (Kennedy 1985; Zavagno 2009). The East Roman empire, as a result of these factors, was to remain the dominant political entity in Europe and the Mediterranean until 600 and was rivalled only by its eastern neighbour, the Sassanian Persians, with whom it maintained uneasy, and occasionally hostile, relations.

During the reign of the Emperor Justinian I (r. 527–65), a series of military campaigns undertaken by the East Roman Empire, directed by the General Belisarius, succeeded in returning several of the western territories lost in 476 to Roman imperial control. At the close of Justinian’s reign in 565 – around five years before the traditional birthdate of Muḥammad – the East Roman Empire controlled a territory which extended from the shores of southern Spain to the fringes of the Arabian Desert (Lee 2005).
Christians in the world of Late Antiquity: law and doctrine

Christian communities had existed in some form in the Roman Empire since the first century but, prior to the declaration of the Edict of Toleration (311) and the Edict of Milan (313), Christianity had possessed no legal status within the Roman Empire and Christians had been subjected to periodic persecution by the Roman authorities, including several highly public executions. The passing of the two edicts noted, during the reigns of the Emperors Constantine I, Galerius and Licinius, bestowed Christianity with full legal recognition within the empire, granting Christians freedom of worship and ensuring the protection of their property from confiscation and damage.

Although it legalised Christian practice, the Edict of Milan of 313 effectively granted Christianity the same recognition and privileges as existing Roman cults and did not accord Christianity special privileges among them. The progressive Christianisation of the imperial and civic elite over the course of the fourth century, however, facilitated its gradual rise as the dominant cult of the Roman Empire and was to culminate in the recognition of Christianity as the official religion of the state by the emperor Theodosius in the 390s – a shift that was preceded and followed by increasing prohibitions against traditional Roman cults and Jewish communities.

The Edict of Milan in 313 was followed a decade later by the summoning of the first ecumenical (from the Greek *oikoumene* meaning ‘universal’ or ‘worldwide’) council at Nicaea in 325 by the Emperor Constantine I, primarily as a means of achieving doctrinal unity within the newly recognised Christian church (Ayres 2006).

The predominant theological questions for Christian writers of Late Antiquity largely concerned the definition of the Trinity and the relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Such debates had existed among Christian communities since the second century, but the gathering at Nicaea in 325, overseen by the Emperor Constantine I, marked the first occasion on which an attempt to reach a codified definition of this belief had been undertaken on a such a scale and in the presence of the imperial authorities.

The premise of calling the 325 Council of Nicaea had been to resolve a doctrinal dispute which had arisen between Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, and the priest Arius concerning their respective positions on Christ’s status. Whereas Alexander stressed the eternal coexistence of Christ with the Father, Arius’ interpretation identified Christ as a creation of God the Father and thus subordinate to him in divinity. The conclusions of the Council of Nicaea officially ratified the teachings of Alexander, which were formally announced in a statement of belief known as the Nicene Creed. Decisions regarding the date of the Easter celebrations and the formulation of the earliest canon laws of the church were also reached.

These collective agreements defined a series of orthodox (from the Greek *orthos* ‘right’ and *doxos* ‘opinion’) doctrines and practices which were sanctioned by the imperial authority and intended to unite Christians across the Empire within a common framework of practice and belief. Its effects were not, however, immediate, and although its decisions were endorsed by the Emperor Constantine, the acceptance of ‘Nicene Christianity’ as the benchmark of orthodox practice in the empire was not established until the Council of Constantinople in 381. The Council of Nicaea nonetheless established an important dynamic between emperor and church and the significance of councils as the means by which doctrinal disputes were resolved. This structure was subsequently replicated at the other major theological councils of Late Antiquity: of the seven ecumenical councils convened between 325 and 787, each was presided over by the reigning emperor and attended by representatives from across the western and eastern territories of the
church. Smaller councils, often held in territories outside Roman imperial control, also mirrored this protocol into the Middle Ages, with local monarchs presiding.

Opponents of the doctrine articulated at Nicaea in 325 continued to operate within the empire following 325, gaining considerable support in the eastern territories.

The summoning of the Second Ecumenical Council in 381, however, marked a shift by establishing the Nicene Creed as the official doctrine of the empire and prescribing a series of legislative restrictions against its opponents, who were formally defined as ‘heretics’ (from the Greek airesis, ‘thing chosen’ or ‘chosen by man’) (Freeman 2009). The wider effects of the 381 council and its later successors were to generate increasing restrictions upon the empire’s non-Christian populations of Jews and Samaritans. Further attempts to impose a uniform orthodoxy in the empire were made at the ecumenical Councils of Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451) and Constantinople (553), all of which sought to reaffirm the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. The Council of Chalcedon (451), which engendered a further debate regarding the relationship between the human and divine natures of Christ, provoked a decisive schism which placed several of the Christian communities in the East, including the Armenian, ‘Coptic’, Ethiopic and Syriac churches, in opposition to imperially sanctioned doctrine which had accepted the council’s teachings (Price and Gaddis 2005–7).

By 600, the Christian world of Late Antiquity was populated by a patchwork of Christian denominations which coexisted with the ‘Orthodox Chalcedonian’ Church backed by Roman imperial authority. In the west, the collapse of the West Roman Empire in 476 complicated attempts at doctrinal uniformity as the emergence of the ‘Germanic’ post-Roman kingdoms, whose rulers endorsed a form of Arianism, resulted in the creation of competing church hierarchies and communities in the former regions of Italy, North Africa and Spain.

Although in the east Roman control had remained stable throughout the fifth century, imperial endorsement for the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 led to considerable factional divisions among the Christian populations within its territories. Anatolia, Arabia and Palaestina remained more supportive of the council’s decisions in the long term, but opposition to ‘Chalcedonian Orthodoxy’ was sustained among the communities in Egypt and those on the borders of the empire in the Jazira, Armenia and Sassanian Persia. Such communities were often subjected to periodic bouts of persecution and were generally restricted in their ability to attain high-ranking positions within the imperial bureaucracy of the East Roman Empire.

The church

Although churches had already acquired a degree of organisation prior to the fourth century, following the Council of Nicaea in 325 the church as an institution was progressively formalised in terms of its structure, worship and administration. Attempts to define a coherent form of liturgy were already underway by the late fourth century. These actions coincided with increasing attempts to fix the dates of important Christian feasts, which competed with established pagan festivals and were gradually to supplant them over the course of the fourth to sixth centuries (Salzman 1999).

These developments were generally replicated across the majority of Christian denominations, although our understanding of organisational structures in late antique Christianity is largely drawn from Nicene/Chalcedonian sources.

As with many aspects of life in Late Antiquity, the main organising principle of the church was hierarchy. At its head, the late antique church was dominated by the figure of the Patriarch (from the Greek patriarches, meaning ‘head of the family’), who formally governed the church and the Christian communities of a defined geographical region known as a Patriarchate. This
role was autonomous in principal but frequently overlapped with the ambitions and politics of the emperor and imperial court.

In the imperial Chalcedonian church, five patriarchates, known collectively as the *Pentarchy* or ‘rule of five’, were officially recognised by the sixth century, at Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, Jerusalem and Rome (Herrin 2004; Herrin 2015: 239–66). The Patriarchate of Rome, headed by the pope (from the Latin *papa* ‘father’), which claimed traditional descent from St Peter, generally assumed primacy over its counterparts, although not without contest at several points in its history. This system of governance, although interrupted by the Arab conquests of the seventh century (which placed Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem outside East Roman imperial control), continued until the ‘Great Schism’ of 1054, at which point the unified Chalcedonian church formally separated into a Latin-speaking West, governed from Rome, and a Greek-speaking Eastern church centred on Constantinople (Morris 1989: 134–53).

In Late Antiquity, the territories of the individual patriarchates were formally divided into separate administrative units known as *dioceses* (from the Greek *diokesis*, meaning ‘administration’). Each diocese was overseen by a ‘bishop’ (from the Greek *epískopos*, meaning ‘guardian’), who oversaw the governance of the diocese and its clergy. Bishops responsible for the affairs of sizeable territories or larger cities were generally known as archbishops or metropolitans (Rapp 2013). Provision at a local level, most importantly the celebration of baptism and the daily liturgy, was by priests (from the Greek *presbuteros*, meaning ‘elder’), active in churches in urban and rural settlements across the Empire. Daily running of the church, including its administration and the maintenance of its building, was often undertaken by members of the laity performing the roles of deacons (from the Greek *diakonos*, meaning servant) and other administrative posts. With the exception of the role of the deaconess, which appears in a number of church dedications of the sixth century, women were generally excluded from holding positions of rank within the organisational structure of the church. Women could, however, enter monastic life and govern female monastic communities.

Monasticism (originating from the Greek *monos*, meaning ‘alone’) involved the voluntary withdrawal of individuals from society in order to dedicate their life to prayer and the teachings of the Gospel. Tradition identifies Egypt as the birth place of monasticism around the third century, beginning with Anthony of Egypt, whose life was recorded by his contemporary Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 295–373). While research in recent decades has called into question the role of Anthony as the ‘father’ of monasticism, Athanasius’ *Life of Anthony* established an important literary model for monastic figures which was to be widely replicated in Late Antiquity (Ashbrook-Harvey 2008: 608–11; Barnes 1993; Brakke 1995; Drake 2008: 446–64).

Late antique monasticism was broadly divided into two distinct practices: eremitic (derived from the Greek *eremites*, meaning ‘of the desert’), which involved the physical withdrawal of an individual, usually to the wilderness, and coenobitic (from the Greek words *koinos*, ‘common,’ and *bios*, ‘life’), which stressed the importance of communal living and the adherence to a defined series of regulations known as ‘rules’. Monastic rules survive from as early as the fourth century, with many, such as the rule of St Benedict (c. 489–c. 547), establishing important precedents for monastic practice in the Middle Ages (Dunn 2003: 111–37). Male and female adherents of both monastic ‘styles’ are known throughout the late antique period, though the popular figure of the eremitic monastic figure never achieved the level of popularity in the West that it did in the East (Burton-Christie 1993; Goehring 1999).

Although representing a symbolic withdrawal from the ‘material’ world, the attraction of monastic communities to elite and imperial patrons often resulted in substantial endowments and donations to individual communities. This is particularly true of monasteries which operated as prestige centres of important Christian cults. St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai, founded
in the sixth century by the Emperor Justinian I, became an important destination of pilgrimage due to its association with the Prophet Moses, a status it was to maintain beyond Late Antiquity (Coleman and Elsner 1994: 73–89; Forsyth 1968: 1–19). Endowments were often linked to the important social role performed by monastic foundations as venues of hospitality and the support they provided to vulnerable groups, including widows, orphans and the poor.

The level of monastic wealth in Late Antiquity is difficult to estimate in its entirety, in view of the poor level of documentation for the majority of foundations known to have existed by 600. What does survive, however, from the regions of Egypt, Arabia-Palaestina and Italy, points to a fairly widespread pattern of monastic landholding across the late antique world. Archaeological research has supplemented this impression considerably in recent decades and has consistently demonstrated the high standards of living and diet in such institutions in comparison with their nonmonastic communities. The discovery and publication of a number of papyrus hoards, from both Egypt and the former regions of Palaestina and Arabia, has also illustrated the substantial involvement of monastic communities in local legal administration, money lending and agricultural production into the seventh century (Boud’hors et al. 2009; Kraemer 1958).

**Christian languages in Late Antiquity**

No single language dominated Christian worship during Late Antiquity, and the experience of individual Christians was constantly framed by the interactions between languages employed by government administration and those used locally in the daily life of individual regions. In the context of the late Roman Empire, however, two languages came to dominate the liturgical practices and elite theological discourse of the church between the fourth and seventh centuries.

In the territories of the Roman west, stretching from the British Isles to the Italian peninsula and North Africa, Latin was most frequently employed and continued to be used by writers such as Isidore of Seville (c. 560–c. 636) (Henderson 2007) and Gregory of Tours (c. 538–94) (Heinzelmann 2001) long after the collapse of Roman imperial authority in 476 (Smith 2005: 13–50). The use of Greek, the original language of the Gospels and Letters of St Paul, was concentrated primarily in the territories of the East Roman Empire, in the Aegean and Anatolia, as well as Syria-Palaestina and Egypt. The use of Latin and Greek in these regions also extended to media such as dedicatory or burial inscriptions, which were commonly used in the public promotion of Christian piety.

These were general rather than absolute divisions, and efforts to translate scripture, theological treatises or hagiographies, already underway before the fourth century, often resulted in a more permeable exchange of texts and practices during the late antique period.

Centres such as Rome, which continued to attract monastic communities and candidates for the papacy from the provinces of the East Roman Empire, were characterised by a particularly fluid negotiation of the two languages, as witnessed in the bilingual inscriptions which adorn the seventh- and eighth-century fresco schemes of the Church of Santa Maria Antiqua (Ekonomou 2007; Lucey 2008: 139–58).

Local vernaculars also significantly tempered this environment, and it is quite clear that languages used in particular regions had also developed vibrant literary traditions in their own right by 500. ‘Coptic’ works from Egypt are attested from the fourth century (Papaconstantinou 2011), and more recent research on Christo-Palestinian Aramaic and Syriac works have also significantly advanced our understanding of the literary traditions of languages which coexisted with Greek in the regions of Mesopotamia and Syria-Palaestina (Brock 2011). Compositions produced in Armenian and Georgian and Ethiopic are also attested in areas on the borders of Roman imperial territory by the sixth century.
Such traditions were often closely linked to confessional groups which opposed the official Chalcedonian orthodoxy adhered to by the Roman imperial family. Coptic and Syriac works, for example, both remained important repositories of anti-Chalcedonian commentary and polemic beyond the Arab conquest. This was never an absolute distinction, and the high degree of bilingualism in many regions of the late antique world often resulted in the coexistence of two languages within the context of single confessional communities. In Palaestina, a largely Chalcedonian region, for example, the use of Syriac and Aramaic is attested alongside Greek in a number of papyrus fragments, inscriptions and ostraka (Hoyland 2004: 183–99).

**Christian building in Late Antiquity**

Prior to the legal toleration of Christianity in 313, Christian communal gatherings had, as far as we can determine, customarily taken place privately, either in burial sites or domestic structures adapted to accommodate early Christian communal worship such as ‘domus ecclesiae’ or ‘house churches’. The majority of these are known only through texts, although an important discovery of the house church of Dura Europos (now in modern Syria), dated to the third century, provides one very early example of a church which was created by adapting a pre-existing building to accommodate the practices of its Christian community. Such sites, although decorated with explicitly Christian themes internally, were generally unassuming from the exterior and did not greatly impact upon the urban landscape of the cities in which they were founded (Krautheimer 1986: 23–37).

The legalisation of Christianity in 313 and the conversion of members of the imperial family to Christianity, including Constantine I’s mother, Helena, heralded an important shift in the emergence of a distinctly Christian monumental architecture. Helena’s journey to the province of Palaestina in the years c. 326–28 to visit the sites of Christ’s life, described by her contemporary, the Bishop Eusebius, culminated in the foundation of the churches of the Nativity at Bethlehem (identified as the site of Christ’s birth) and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem (identified as the site of Christ’s Crucifixion and Resurrection) (Biddle 1999: 53–73; Richmond 1937).

Helena’s actions established a number of important protocols for Roman imperial patronage of church building and the role Christianity came to play in promoting the public identity of elites in Late Antiquity following the fourth century. Importantly, the foundation of both churches, alongside similarly opulent constructions in Rome at the Lateran and over the tomb of St Peter (Gem 2013), were the first cases in which the public identity of the Roman imperial family was explicitly linked to the construction of church buildings. Following this period, the endowment of congregational churches, monastic houses and churches built to commemorate venerated sites or individuals (*martyria*) was increasingly to occupy the concerns of imperial patrons in the fifth and sixth centuries (Brubaker 1997: 52–75).

The particular association of Syria, Palestine and Egypt with the events of the Bible and early Christian martyrs lent renewed focus to the eastern provinces as areas of interest to imperial patrons in the Roman Empire. Jerusalem was subject to a series of imperial endowments following the fourth century in the form of the churches of St Stephen, under the Empress Eudoxia (r. 421–60), and later under the Emperor Justinian I (r. 527–65), with the foundation of a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, known as the Nea Church, which was completed around 540 and rivalled in size only by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (Gutfeld 2012: 141–251).

Additional examples of imperial patronage at Qal’at Siman and Mount Gerazim by the Emperor Zeno (Krautheimer 1986: 145–58) and the Monastery of St Catherine’s on Mount Sinai by the Emperor Justinian I (Forsyth 1968: 1–19; Coleman and Elsner 1994: 73–89) give
testimony to imperial building activities in this region beyond Jerusalem itself. These were, however, undertaken alongside similarly ambitious constructions in other regions of imperial control, of which we may note Justinian’s commissioning of the churches of San Vitale (Ravenna) (Deliyannis 2010: 201–76), St John’s (Ephesus) (Foss 2010: 88–94) and Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (Mainstone 1997), which remained the world’s largest Christian structure until the sixteenth century. Many of the rulers of the successor kingdoms which emerged in the West during the fifth century also continued the Roman imperial custom of commissioning the construction of churches and the endowment of monasteries and other religious houses. Among the most prominent surviving examples of Late Antiquity include the Church of Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (dated 504), commissioned by King Theodoric (Deliyannis 2010: 146–51), and the Church of San Juan at Baños de Cerrato in central Spain, consecrated in 652 during the reign of the Visigothic king Recceswinth (Barral i Altet 1997: 100–2).

The Christianisation of the late antique landscape

The initial constructions commissioned by the Constantinian dynasty in the fourth century were also formative in the development of a standardised architecture for Christian buildings which was to be widely replicated in later constructions throughout the Mediterranean. The most common structural design of churches in Late Antiquity was the basilica, an architectural form modelled on Roman precursors but quickly adapted to incorporate the liturgical requirements of Christian worship. Easily replicated on a range of scales and ideally suited for congregational gatherings, the basilica form was to dominate church construction until the ninth century.

One of the formative developments in the architectural history of Christianity in Late Antiquity was the increasing prominence of venerating at the tombs of holy figures as a means of obtaining divine blessing. This practice had originated in veneration of the burial sites associated with martyrs and grew out of a developing belief in the role played by holy men or women in mediating between God and humanity. By the sixth century, monastic figures and other holy men or women, including bishops, were also venerated as effective intercessors (Brown 1981). The belief that physical proximity to and contact with the sites associated with ‘holy men’ could transfer divine blessing catalysed the growth of a number of large cult churches designed to accommodate large numbers of worshippers and facilitate access to the physical remains of the holy figure.

The importance of church construction as a continuation, especially after the reign of Theodosius I, of traditional Roman ideals of euergetism (from the Greek euergeto, meaning ‘the doing of good deeds’), resulted in a wide replication of these activities across the late antique Mediterranean with the construction of churches in almost all of the Roman Empire’s major urban centres. Pilgrimage to particular holy sites in Jerusalem as well as prominent sites in Rome, Syria and Egypt also facilitated the construction of churches equipped to accommodate large congregations (Dietz 2005; Frank 2008; Hunt 1982).

The impact of church building on individual cities varied considerably according to individual regions and urban environments. In cities such as Gerasa (Jordan) and Ephesus (modern Turkey), churches were deliberately constructed in areas specifically designed to encroach upon temple property and were often built of spolia – generally reused stone material – salvaged from earlier structures (Foss 2010: 51–4; Wharton 1995). In cities such as Rome and Constantinople, however, the process appears far more protracted, and traditional spaces such as the forum continued to function into the sixth century.

The central place occupied by church construction in the activities of patrons following the fourth century also resulted in the gradual disuse of older elements of the Roman civic landscape. Bathhouses appear to have been generally maintained, but other structures characteristic
of earlier Roman urban plans, such as circuses, hippodromes and odea, steadily fell into disuse or were turned over for industrial production as the church gradually eclipsed their public role.

The political upheavals of the fifth century in the former western provinces of the Roman Empire meant that patterns of Christianisation exhibited more marked regional variation (Collins 1999: 234–61). In the provinces of Italy, North Africa and Spain, which were more heavily Christianised by the fifth century, the adoption of Christianity by the new ‘Germanic’ rulers was achieved fairly rapidly and resulted in greater continuity of Christian life in these regions. Evidence from Britain and continental Europe is more ephemeral until the seventh and eighth centuries, and the reintroduction of Christianity in these regions has traditionally been linked to the activities of the papacy in Rome during the tenures of Pope Gregory I (r. 590–604) and Gregory II (r. 715–31) (Dunn 2009: 43–56). The ongoing political and economic strength of the East Roman Empire, by contrast, contributed to the continuing wealth of Christian patrons into the fifth and sixth centuries. Recent excavations of churches have also identified cases of continued foundation and maintenance of church buildings into the later eighth century in regions that came to be incorporated within the Umayyad Caliphate.

Archaeological research points to the fifth century as the period in which the Christianisation of rural settlements accelerated throughout the Mediterranean. This is most visibly traced through the construction of small rural churches located in villages, commissioned by networks of rural peasant donors or locally prominent families. Two examples, in the small basilicas at Horvat Hesheq in the Galilee (Aviam 1990) and at Herodium near Bethlehem (Netzer et al. 1993), both commissioned for prayer for the salvation of individual donors and their households, illustrate such a pattern, which can be observed most explicitly in the Eastern Roman Empire by 500. The survival of donation registers connected to churches or monasteries in Egypt and Palestine also testifies to the steady trickle of small donations contributed by rural patrons which served to maintain such structures beyond the point of foundation.

**Christians in Late Antiquity, 300–600**

By 600 Christians had become the dominant religious group of the late antique Mediterranean, and Christianity had also acquired a central role in the public identity of its elites and in the spaces inhabited by its populations. The late antique world, which Muhammad and his contemporaries would have encountered to the north and west of pre-Islamic Arabia, was predominantly a Christian one. Churches populated rural and urban settlements throughout the Mediterranean, and Christian practices, customs and institutions provided the basic structures which determined and shaped the life course of many of its inhabitants. Since the fourth century, Christianity had emerged from being an illegal and marginalised faith to one actively endorsed by the Roman imperial family and the many rulers of the kingdoms which governed the former western territories of the Roman Empire. These changes also generated great diversity. Although attempts to achieve doctrinal uniformity across the Christian world had been undertaken since 325, the Christian world of Late Antiquity was populated by a number of confessional factions which maintained separate beliefs and practices which, by 600, had gained a high degree of coherency in opposition to their contemporaries. The dramatic political and economic changes which occurred after 400 produced further distinctions in the level of Christianisation and the ‘visibility’ of Christian life across the entire region. The East, by 600 the dominant political and economic centre, exhibited a level of Christianisation which was not to be matched in the west until after the eleventh century. These variations are important to acknowledge, because they were to shape the nature of the subsequent interactions between these groups after the 630s, when many of the Christians in the east found themselves under the rule of the earliest Arab armies.
References


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Christians in Late Antiquity, 300–600


Further reading


