

Images of the Good Christian Ruler in the Mediterranean and the Near East (4th-10th Centuries)

Veranstalter: Leibniz-Projekt „Polyphonie des spätantiken Christentums“, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

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The later Roman Empire gave birth to different concepts of good Christian rulership. The spread of Christianity urged both rulers and the ruled to consider essential questions, including loyalty to non-Christian rulers, the relationship of political and ecclesiastical institutions, the role of monastic authority, and the tension between Christianity's universal claim and political particularism. The variety of cultures that saw these developments necessitated an equally diverse range of scholars from different fields of historical and religious studies to gather in Frankfurt am Main to approach questions concerning these conceptualizations of good Christian rulers both transepoachally and transculturally. The conference was financed by a generous grant of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the Leibniz award, enabling the organizer, Professor Hartmut Leppin, to establish a project on the „Polyphony of late Antique Christianity“. The conference focused on interactions both within Christianity and between those who considered themselves Christians and adherents of other traditions, spanning across the Mediterranean and the Near East. The conference proceeded in a circular geographical order, beginning with papers on the Roman Empire itself, moving on to the Coptic, Syriac and Arabic worlds, before focusing on the Caucasus and Iran as well as the Balkans, and finally taking a look towards post-Roman traditions in the West.

HARTMUT LEPPIN (Frankfurt am Main) opened the conference with an outline of traditional reflections on good rulership in the Roman Empire. He identified common

ground between adherents and opponents of Christianity in considering mildness and benevolence essential virtues in a ruler. However, within Christian thought, this early consensus vied for preeminence with the exemplary character of the Old Testament's ideal rulers, resulting in a conceptual merger of these streams of thought beginning with Constantine's reign. By the reign of Justinian, this development had reached its climax, resulting in his depiction as a holy man and humility becoming a virtue of the good Christian ruler.

What had initially been broadly outlined was to be explored in depth during the first session „Roman Traditions East and West“. MICHAIL BOJCOV (Moscow) showed that during Ambrose's clash with Theodosius, it was anything but self-evident that this humility and even a ruler's public penitence could and would be morally exalting – it was Ambrose's original contribution that made it a precondition of Christian rulership. KAI PREUSS (Frankfurt am Main) emphasized that these new notions became manifest not only in political action, but also in conceptual thought, in his presentation on the concept of rule espoused by Augustine of Hippo in his so-called mirror for princes within the „City of God“. Originating in an essentially worldly understanding of the ruler's office, good Christian rulership to him was more a matter of personal ethics than political theory. The result was a lack of interest in political theology proper and a Christian perspective on political action that bordered on quietism. HELMUT SENG (Frankfurt am Main) showed that, at the very same time, classical notions of good rule were all but gone by focusing on works of a fourth-century bishop of Ptolemais, Synesios. Deeply influenced by Neoplatonism and with extensive experience as an emissary in Constantinople, he struggled to unite skillfully crafted, philosophically expressed comments on current imperial policy with mythically coded references to cosmic power struggles between an ideal ruler and his antagonist. In so doing, he exemplified trends in Christian thought that were less preoccupied with creating new concepts than with appropriating preexisting ones.

PHILIP BOOTH (Oxford) demonstrated that this concern for a common past contin-

ued well into post-Roman times in his contribution to the second session on the „Coptic World“. Focusing on the Chronicle of the Egyptian bishop John of Nikiu, Booth demonstrated that, while often held to be preoccupied with Egyptian history, the author in fact considered the Greco-Roman and Biblical past his most important point of reference, narrowing his focus to Egypt only when sources for the wider Roman world failed him. Assessing the Muslim rulers of his time, religious tolerance towards Egypt's Christians overshadowed all other potential qualities in a ruler; nevertheless, the Christian Roman Emperor, well known to him through John of Malalas, remained his quintessential ideal ruler. Further anchoring the historiographical compilations produced in the Bishopric of Alexandria between the fifth and eighth centuries in a wider Roman context, ALBERTO CAMPLANI (Rome) analyzed these works focusing on the Emperor's responsibility for safeguarding orthodoxy. He attributed particular importance to Athanasius' innovation of a distinction between the Emperor's integrity and his representatives' deficiencies. He demonstrated how this attitude, present well into Islamic times, was indicative not only of a multi-leveled conception of the interaction of political power and the church in general, but also of the relationship between the Egyptian Church and the Roman Empire in particular.

Moving on to the „Syriac Worlds“, PHILIP WOOD (London) demonstrated the continuation of the Eusebian tradition even under Muslim Arab rule. Investigating the example of the patriarch Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, he explored changing attitudes towards the Caliphate and conceptualizations of patriarchal authority, showing that the patriarch was considered central to efforts to maintain the Christian community's cohesion under Muslim rule. PHILIP FORNESS (Frankfurt am Main) addressed the issue of several Late Antique authors praising Emperors with whom they disagreed theologically. Comparing the praise of rulers by Gregory of Nazianzus, Ephrem the Syrian and Jacob of Serugh he sought to contextualize these authors' perspective on good rule, taking into account their presence on Rome's and Persia's dis-

puted border.

Sections on the Arabic World, Iran, Armenia, Caucasian Albania, Georgia, and the Slavonic Balkans followed on the same day. ALMUT HÖFERT (Zürich) offered the first contribution through a comparative approach to the good Muslim Ruler from the seventh to the ninth centuries. Noticing remarkable similarities between Christian and Muslim rulers in terminology and assertion of imperial preeminence, she also demonstrated that Muslims avoided doctrinal internecine conflict as well as unrest among the conquered through their own brand of hierarchical imperial monotheism that had Islam at the apex but still left room for Jews and Christians. Underscoring the longevity of pre-Islamic concepts within Christian communities of the Caliphate, MARIA CONTERNO (Ghent) traced ideal Christian rulership in the Melkite Arabic chronicle of Agapius of Mabbug, exploring this community's attachment to their fellow Chalcedonians on the Byzantine throne in respect to their understanding of the Constantinian paradigm. She further emphasized Agapius' resorting to Late Antique and possibly non-Christian source material on Constantine out of which he fashioned an original concept of a good Christian ruler. Shifting perspectives, JOSEF WIESEHÖFER (Kiel) provided insight into the Sasanian Empire, discussing sources of Sasanian rulers' authority and legitimacy. Additionally, he identified a set of key requirements, among them noble extraction, evident divine blessing, orthopraxy, maintaining order and patronage of the sciences, and concluded with the formative influence that these ideas had on Islamic concepts of ideal rule.

Three contributions on Christian Armenia followed: First, IGOR DORFMANN-LAZAREV (Frankfurt am Main) dealt with Gagik Arscruni, king (931-936) of Vaspurakan, focusing on the iconography of a church built by him on the island of Lake Van. He argued that the church's exterior decoration was specifically meant to appeal to Muslim observers, too, through use of familiar narrative motifs and appeals to the aforementioned Iranian ideals of rulership, interpreting these sympathetic appeals to non-Christians as implicit recognition of their importance in sta-

bilizing this Christian king's rule. Second, AZAT BOZOYAN (Yerevan) gave a survey of the reception of the Arsacid Dynasty in Medieval Armenian historiography, describing the special place reserved for it in Armenian sources. Tracing common Armenian and Byzantine historiographical traditions, he showed how the image of the Arsacid dynasty helped shape concepts of good Christian rulership. TIM GREENWOOD (St. Andrews) offered the final contribution on Armenian through a philological analysis of Late Antique Armenian literature and the terms for rulership used. Recognizing inherent limitations in the source material, he still was able to discern separate terms for Persian or non-Roman kings and Roman Emperors, with individual compositions attesting to a complicated interplay of cultures, Christian and non-Christian, Persian, Hellenistic and Roman. Adding Caucasian Albania to the perspective, ALEKSAN HAKOBYAN (Yerevan) used the „Tale of Vachagan“ to illustrate how panegyric hagiography can be treated as evidence for underlying concepts of good Christian rule—concepts whose longevity ensured that Vachagan's story would be used as an example of virtue and piety for centuries to come. Continuing with a focus on idealized rulers of the Caucasus, UDO REINHOLD JECK (Bochum) discussed the fictitious self-interpretation of the Georgian monarch Vakhtang I Gorgasali in the so-called „Life of Kartli“. Caught between two empires, the king was fashioned as a champion of Christianity, battling Zoroastrian attempts to subvert his ideal Christian rule, but he also exhibited undeniable Classical influences, considering himself as both defending the faith and striving towards the ideal of a philosopher-king. Concluding this section, DANIEL ZIEMANN (Budapest) explored the ambiguity of goodness and cruelty for the Christian rulers of the First Bulgarian Empire. Faced with noble revolts threatening Christianization, the newly baptized Bulgarian ruler Boris resorted to extreme cruelty to quell resistance and enforce his decision. Ziemann continued to argue that Christianization did not change the nature of agonistic societies' violent power dynamics, while reinvigorating them with a divisive issue like con-

version.

The conference's last section was dedicated to „Post-Roman Traditions“. KONRAD VÖSSING (Bonn) surveyed the representation of the Vandal king in Latin poetry of Late Roman Africa, observing a break between traditional rhetoric describing the king as 'ornament of the empire' and other statements showing him as a *rex barbarus*. WOLFRAM DREWS (Münster) presented his work on the image of the Christian ruler in the Catholic Visigothic kingdom, approaching the „Historia Wambae“ of Julian of Toledo as a case study. He revealed the underlying archetype of the *princeps religiosus* opposing the tyrant, before interpreting the fact that Julian ignored certain key aspects of rulership as a form of implicit criticism by omission and thus informed by Classical models. FLORIAN HARTMANN (Bonn) approached the question of good Christian rulership by analyzing Papal letters from the fourth to eighth centuries, demonstrating that the particular depiction of the good ruler depended decisively on the letter's occasion and that the ideas of good rulership shifted only slightly in the course of 500 years. Upholding ecclesiastical law emerged as a new monarchical responsibility, but the most notable attributes of the good Christian ruler remained safeguarding the true faith, defending the unity of the church, and securing Papal primacy. Finally, ISABEL TORAL-NIEHOFF (Berlin / Göttingen) added an important perspective to the conference by discussing mirrors of princes in Islamic Spain. She focused on the political sections of a literary encyclopedia from the Caliphal period in Umayyad Cordoba entitled „The Unique Necklace“ and emphasized the „secular“ character of the book, which does not provide a vision of the ideal Muslim ruler, nor of the perfect Caliph, but rather of the just ruler, drawing on Persian, Indian, Biblical and Late Antique Near Eastern sources. She demonstrated that a pervading concept of perennial wisdom that surpassed boundaries of time and space as evident in the Necklace allowed this work to ascribe all these traditions of good rulership to a unified history of mankind whose peak was the rule of Islam. This was interpreted as an inclusive, yet imperial discourse that sought to embrace, inte-

grate, and absorb all cultures into Islam.

HARTMUT LEPPIN gave concluding remarks that united the various lectures' insights. He highlighted three core themes: Virtues of the rulers, historical examples, and the influence of counsellors. Traditional virtues continued to exert a considerable influence on the concepts of rulership. This included not only Greco-Roman, but also Persian and perhaps other, local traditions. The specifically Christian virtue of humility seems to have had a limited influence. In turn, liberal support of arts and sciences seems to have been critical to Sasanian and Islamic concepts of rulership, much more than to Christian ones. Although Christian rulers were regarded as sent by God, few Christian rulers defined their role as a religious office. Many examples for good or bad rulership were derived from the Old Testament. A more recent paragon was Constantine the Great, less so Theodosius the Great. Roman generals, Persian rulers and Alexander the Great also remained points of reference for the monarchical discourse even outside the Roman Empire. Many papers provided evidence of the crucial role that counsellors played in these monarchies. Some acted as prophets, claiming to be entitled to criticize the ruler with all frankness. Others relied on intellectual expertise and opted for a more diplomatic approach. Although good rulers were not expected to follow every piece of advice, they were expected to listen to counsellors as well as to representatives of their subjects.

In conclusion, the conference achieved its aim of bringing together scholars from various fields to discuss the complex questions that arise from taking a transepochal and transcultural approach to the topic of good Christian rulership. It became clear how varied the conceptions of monarchical rule were in the Christian world, but also how important the common heritage of Biblical and historical figures was. Many forms of exchange between different cultures emerged from the papers which suggest the value of future work on the complexity of these developments, especially concerning the mutual dependence of Christian and non-Christian political thought on each other.

Conference Overview:

Hartmut Leppin (Frankfurt am Main): Introduction

Section I: Roman Traditions East and West

Michail Bojcov (Moscow): Der gute sündige Herrscher. Ambrosius von Mailand und Theodosius I.

Kai Preuß (Frankfurt am Main): Augustine's Ideal of a Christian Ruler

Helmut Seng (Frankfurt am Main): Ideal und Karikatur. Der gute und der schlechte Herrscher bei Synesios von Kyrene

Section II: Coptic World

Philip Booth (Oxford): Pharaohs, Emperors, and Emirs in the Chronicle of John of Nikiu

Alberto Camplani (Rome): Pious and Impious Christian Rulers according to Egyptian Historical Accounts, from Timothy Aelurus to George the Coptic Scribe (V-VIII Centuries)

Section III: Syriac World

Philip Wood (London): Christian Political Thought without an Emperor (in Dionysius of Tel-Mahre)

Philip Forness (Frankfurt am Main): Images of Christian Rulers and Empires during Doctrinal Conflicts

Section IV: Arabic World

Almut Höfert (Zürich): Die Titulatur der Kalifen und monarchische / theologische Begriffe für das Kalifat in der spätantiken imperialen Tradition

Maria Conterno (Ghent): Shaping the Good Christian King under Muslim Rule: Constantine and the Torah in the Melkite Arabic Chronicle of Agapius of Mabbug (10th Cent.)

Section V: Iran

Josef Wiesehöfer (Kiel): Images of the Good Ruler in Sasanian Iran: An Emic View

Section VI: Armenia

Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev (Frankfurt am Main): The Idea of Kingship in the Iconography of the Palatine Church at Ałt'amar (915-921)

Azat Bozoyan (Yerevan): L'interprétation de la dynastie Arsacide dans l'historiographie médiévale Arménienne

Tim Greenwood (St. Andrews): Representa-

tions of Rulership in Late Antique Armenia

Section VII: Caucasian Albania and Georgia

Aleksan Hakobyan (Yerevan): La création d'une image «pieuse» du roi Vatchagan II de l'Albanie du Caucase dans le Conte de Vatchagan (début du VIe siècle)

Udo Reinhold Jeck (Bochum): Wachtang I. (440-502). Christlicher Monarch in Georgien zwischen byzantinischer Reichskirche und Feuerkult der Perser. Auslegung seiner fiktiven Selbstinterpretation im „Leben Kartlis“

Section VIII: Slavonic Balkans

Daniel Ziemann (Budapest): Goodness and Cruelty – The Christian Rulers of the First Bulgarian Tsardom

Section IX: Post-Roman Traditions: Barbaric Kingdoms

Konrad Vössing (Bonn): *Rex barbarus* oder *imperiale decus* – der vandalische König in lateinischen Gedichten des spätantiken Africa
Wolfram Drews (Münster): Das Bild des christlichen Herrschers im katholischen Westgotenreich am Beispiel der *Historia Wambae* des Julian von Toledo

Section X: Post-Roman Traditions: Papacy and Islam

Florian Hartmann (Bonn): Der gute Herrscher aus päpstlicher Perspektive: Kontinuitäten und Diskontinuitäten in den Papstbriefen des 5. bis 8. Jahrhunderts

Isabel Toral-Niehoff (Berlin / Göttingen): Mirrors of Princes in Islamic Spain. The „Unique Necklace“ by Ibn Abdrabbih (10th Century)

Hartmut Leppin (Frankfurt am Main): Final Remarks and Discussion

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