Late Antiquity is a privileged observatory for studying the dynamics of resilience and acceleration which are at the heart of the EASR 2021 conference. The political, social, and economic transformations of the Roman Empire between the fourth and seventh century bred fertile ground for the production, development, and experimentation of new religious concepts, the importance of which was critical in shaping our way of thinking and talking about religion.

Using the notion of “competition”, this panel aims to analyze spaces and places where the various religious groups of the Roman Empire lived and interacted—from cities and countryside to centres and suburbs. Some key questions will be:

How did the spatial dimension characterize and modify religious interactions?
Did the presence and distribution of religious groups have an impact on competitive dynamics?
How was the space of the ancient cities occupied by new divine entities that transformed local identity cultural spaces?

Based on a series of case studies, this workshop session will examine different aspects of late antique religious competition in the multicultural, multireligious, and globalized Roman Empire, such as:
The locations where religious interactions were inscribed;
The key social actors who acted in these contexts (individuals, groups, political and religious authorities);
The balance of power in late antique societies.

By studying the spatialization, the panelists will assess how the specificities of different local contexts affected the religious competition of the period. Through this analysis, the panel will also shed light on the processes that pushed the various groups into strengthening–and rethinking–their religious identities.

485 Beth Shean-Scythopolis, a City of Blurred Identities and Alterities?

Maureen Attali
University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland

Abstract

Formerly part of the Decapolis, the “Greek city” of Nysa-Scythopolis, also known under its Semitic name Beth-Shean, was prosperous during Late Antiquity; c. 400, it became the metropolis of the newly created province of Palaestina Secunda. From the 4th until the 6th century, “pagans”, Jews, Christians, and Samaritans inhabited the city, dwelling either in its urban centre or in its surroundings (Heyden, 2010). There is no record of major intercommunity violence in the city during the 4th and 5th centuries, except for one episode of dubious authenticity (Chronicon Paschale a. 362). Interestingly, its inhabitants were all regarded as deviant or unfit by those who deemed themselves religious authorities at some point. The Jews of Beth-Shean are dismissed as uncultured and not fit for liturgical reading in the Jerusalem Talmud (Berakhot 2.4). According to a 9th century chronicle (Chronicle II, 5.5–10 ed. Cohen, 1981), the Samaritan reformer Baba Rabbah demoted all local Samaritan priests. The bishop Epiphanius of Salamis, who visited the city during the late 350's, complained that all Christians in the city were Arians, following their bishop Patrophilus (Panarion, 30,5,5f). It seems that, in various circles, being from Beth-Shean was an ill-repute; indeed, in several Jewish retellings of the Biblical Book of Esther, Haman, the enemy of the Jews, was said to be from either Beth Shean or the nearby village of Kfar Kernos (piyyut n°34 in Yahalom & Sokoloff, 1999; Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 16a; Midrash Rabba on Leviticus 28.6). The city is also associated with religious fluidity and conversion, as reported by Epiphanius and as evidenced epigraphic finds (Foerster & Tsafir, 1997).

A similar bias seems to affect the writings of modern scholars. The synagogue found at Tel Istaba, located 300 meters north of the city, has a room with an inscription written in Samaritan characters, but its excavator argued for a building shared by Jews and Samaritans alike (Zori, 1967). Within the urban centre, a building known as the “house of Leontis”, which include many architectural features and typical decor of Late Antique Jewish synagogues, is often referred to as “Judaeo-Christian” (Safrai, 2003). However, this phrase is
problematic, as we do not have any indication of anyone calling him or herself a “Judaeo-Christian” during Antiquity (Broadhead, 2010). The unwillingness to consider the building a Jewish synagogue seems to derive from the fact that it was decorated with an elaborate mythological mosaic panel; however, mythological iconography has been found in many other synagogues whose Jewishness has never been disputed. While many studies have convincingly shown that religious identities were far from clear-cut in Late Antiquity (Belayche & Mimouni 2009) and that the definition of Judaism and Christianity devised by religious authorities did not always concur with the views of sincere believers (Yoshiko Reed, 2003 and 2018), in some case, it seems that cohabitation and Hellenism have been wrongfully interpreted as religious transgressions.
Seleukeia Heights. Altitude as a Place of Religious Competition between Saint Thekla and Athena in Seleukeia on the Kalykadnos (Rough Cilicia)

Nuna Terri
Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

Abstract

The flourishing cult of Saint Thekla in Seleukeia on the Kalykadnos (actual Silifke), a city on the south coast of Asia Minor, developed at least from the third century onwards, attracting pilgrims from afar – including Gregory of Nazianzus and Egeria. Thekla, the young virgin from Iconium whose story was told in the Acts of Paul and Thecla, is presumed to have finished her life in this strongly Hellenised city of Cilicia Trachea. Even though the western meridional part of Asia Minor had seen evangelisation missions early on at the beginning of the spread of Christianity – e.g. Saint Paul of Tarsus, from neighbouring Cilicia Pedias – the successful implantation of Thekla’s cult in Seleukeia was not a foregone conclusion. A Seleucid foundation from c. 294 BC, the city had an appreciable Graeco-Roman pantheon, whose divinities were still worshipped by some part of the population in the fifth century. The Christian cult of the Saint consequently had to compete with pre-existing pagan ones to establish its predominance in the religious landscape.

This is well illustrated in the mid-fifth century Life and Miracles of Saint Thekla, a bipartite work of a devotee of the saint dating from the mid-fifth century. The Miracles show how the cult of Athena was one of the greatest competitors to Thekla’s cult in Seleukeia and its surroundings. The worship of the goddess in Cilicia Trachea is characterised by her sanctuaries in the mountains around the city while in Seleukeia itself, she was probably worshipped on the acropolis. It is therefore noteworthy that Thekla had her own shrine in Meriamlik (also known as Ayatekla), a site located two kilometres south of the city on a hill, with a view towards Seleukeia and its acropolis. Seleukeia was thus divided between two places of worship on high ground, a Christian and a pagan one, which has already been partially discussed by Troels Myrup Kristensen ("Excavating Meriamlik: Sacred space and economy in late antique pilgrimage", 2016). This opposition and the significance of the occupation of the elevated areas are very much present through the Miracles of Thekla and most probably reflects an important phase in the process of transformation of the religious landscape of Seleukeia and its surroundings. The study of this occupation of the heights by the two divine women sheds new light on the competition between their cults and the development of the implantation of Saint Thekla’s cult.
The suburban and peri-urban areas of late antique cities were places of real competition between pagans and Christians. Christians often established their first places of worship out of the city centres, where pagans used to go for municipal processions. Such processions were fundamental for what has been defined as municipal civilization since they symbolically defined the boundaries of provincial cities’ territories. The rare occasions of conflict, such as the ones that occurred in Val di Non in 397/398 (Venitia and Histria) or in Calama (Numidia) in 408, took place during such festivities. It was also in these places, particularly in the funerary areas where pagans and Christians often found themselves next to each other, that a common ground was negotiated, sometimes even displaying a religious reserve or even a desire to build some kind of agreement that was neutral from a religious point of view. The necropolises of Aquileia and Concordia in Venitia and Histria, provide a privileged observatory where a real strategy of resilience took shape among the deceased and their relatives who came to pay tribute to them.
427 The locus of the Seven Monks in Gafsa: Cult of Martyrs and (Re) Appropriation of Space in the Arian-Catholic Competition

Gaetano Spampinato, Caroline Bridel
Université de Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland

Abstract

Late antique North African Christianity appears to be characterised, in some ways more than in other contexts of the Western Empire, by a particular vivacity and dynamism regarding the cult of martyrs. This dynamism, already attested at the time of Tertullian (3rd AD), is due to various historical and religious reasons, both in the relationship between Christians and pagans and in the confrontation between Christians themselves: for example, in the 4th century the “appropriation” of the martyrs, their commemoration and the identification and appropriation of places dedicated to them play an important role in the controversy between Catholics and Donatists.

After the Vandal conquest of North Africa, this fervour around the cult of the martyrs continued to play an important role. Indeed, the presence of a new “barbarian” and, most of all, Arian ruler led this cult to play a renewed identity role in the competition between Catholics and Arians, and not only on an “ideological” level, but also in the perspective of control and (re)appropriation of spaces in urban contexts. The discovery or identification of a site of martyrdom or a tomb of a martyr, in fact, can lead to the reclamation by the Catholic components of the city and the consequent control of the building and the surrounding area – a dynamic whose most famous example is perhaps represented by the episode of the discovery of the relics of Gervasius and Protasius by Ambrose in Milan.

In this paper we will focus on a particular case study related to the Carthaginian context in the Vandal period, that of the locus of the seven monks in the monastery of Bigua (Gafsa), martyred in 484. The Catholic sources (first of all, Victor Bishop of Vita in his Historia persecutionis), in fact, remember that in this period there took place what, according to them, was one of the cruelest persecutions against the Catholics, the one ordered by the king of the Vandals Huneric. After presenting the way in which the story of the martyrdom of the seven monks is reported and the association with the heroic gestae of the Maccabees (with whom the monks are related in an inscription), we will analyze the function of their cult and their locus in relation to the space in the city and to the religious topography, also in relation, of course, to the Arian conquerors and to their impact in religious space. In the interdisciplinary perspective that characterises the ReLAB project on religious competition at the University of Fribourg, the analysis of the textual sources on the cult of the seven martyrs will be associated with an archaeological and material perspective of the site, in order to shed light on the dynamics of (re)appropriation and control of the buildings within the Arian-Catholic competition between the 5th and 6th centuries.
Intra moenia: The Space of Religious Competition in the “Life of Barbatus, the Beneventan Bishop”

Roberto Alciati
Dipartimento SAGAS. Università di Firenze, Firenze, Italy

Abstract

This paper attempts to discuss the constitution (or consolidation) of a new religious subject through spatialized and spatializing techniques. If religion relates people and space, this happens by parceling out and negotiating a continuous urban (and suburban) space (Rüpke).

Against the wide range of hagiographic texts dating from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages, the “Life of Barbatus, the Beneventan bishop” does not begin - as is usually the case - with the birth and life of the vir dei; on the contrary, it focuses on a specific event in Barbatus’ life and career which took place in 663, when the protagonist was already in his sixties. The panic caused in Benevento by a Byzantine siege, led by the first Roman Emperor seen in Italy since 476, urged Barbatus to monopolize the urban religious space to the detriment of the persistent pagan cults carried out by the Lombard elite who governed the city and the countryside. More specifically, I will focus on how the city’s defence was facilitated by the apparition of the Virgin Mary on the city walls as a consequence of Barbatus’ prayers. On the other side, the Lombard elite believed that the defence itself was favoured by the pagan cults they practised. The apparition of the Virgin Mary does not occur in a random location: it takes place on the walls of the city, thus being clearly visible to all. On the contrary, the Lombards officiate their cults secretly (in the cellar of the palace of civil power) or outside the city (a tree-worshipping).

This contrast is relevant for two main reasons: it shows that (1) even a dominant religion - such as Christianity in seventh century Europe - still needs to be secured to space, and that (2) spatial coordinates determine the success of a cult, generally at the expense of another.