Rome and the Ghassānids: Comparative Perspectives on Conversion, Boundaries and Power in Near Eastern Borderlands*

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Eunapios, writing in the late 4th century, tells of the schemes deployed by barbarians to obtain favours and material wealth from the Romans, whom they encountered in the course of their movement into the Empire. In one story he describes a particular group of barbarians who, claiming to be Christians and dressed as bishops and monks, took false oaths and persuaded the Romans that they could be trusted. With little difficulty, the barbarians were able to alter an uneven relationship in their favour, showing in spite of the author’s anti-Christian biases the ways in which Christianity was able to cross even strongly-delineated and traditionally well-defended cultural boundaries such as that between Roman and barbarian (Eunapios, fr. 48.2; Lieu, 2004: 104). Here it was an unnamed group of barbaroi who had managed to leverage a promising position against a much stronger power, but the same frequently happened in reverse, and, indeed, the use of Christianity as a passive method of administration and control appears in a variety of contexts throughout the Empire (Kulikowski, 2006: 361–363; Heather, 2001: 24–25; Blockley, 1992: 116–117, 141).

In the East, the conversion to Christianity of the originally nomadic pastoralist Arab groups, followed by their subsequent incorporation into the Roman Christian oikoumene, aroused the anthropological curiosity of Late Antique Christian authors (Sozomenos, Historia ecclesiastica 6.38; Sokrates Scholasticus, Historia ecclesiastica 4.36; Kyrillos of Skythopolis, Vita Euthymii 15). Elsewhere, as Eunapios hints, bishops occupied an important role as intermediaries, able to negotiate difficult cultural situations and “reconcile” wayward groups with the “settled” world (Sozomenos, Historia ecclesiastica 6.38; Priscus, fr. 31; Isaac, 1990: 246–247).

For the Romans, conversion, or the appearance of conversion, could transform Arabs into acceptable allies, as it could barbarians throughout the Empire. In the opinion of a number of Roman Christian writers, without Christianity’s positive influence in re-drawing and re-ordering cultural values, “nomadic”

* This paper is an earlier treatment of a topic given fuller consideration in Chapter Two of my monograph, Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity (Oxford, 2011).
Arabs would persist in reducing nuns to sexual slavery, monks to the worship of barbarian idols (Zacharias Rhetor, *Chronicle* 2.77) and the unfortunates they captured to perpetual nudity and the tending of animals at pasture (Jerome, *Vita Malchi monachi captivi* 4–5; Hoyland, 2001: 148; Shaw, 1982: 5–31). Rhetorical views such as those of Jerome and Zacharias, which should be viewed within the context of an ongoing prejudicial “settled” discourse on “unsettled” peoples, underline the popular perception that Christianity could bring those who were understood to be nomads—a way of life seen to be virtually synonymous with being a barbarian—into a civilized context, bounded by the linear rules of organized behaviour.

Yet, as this essay argues, the recipients of such “civilising” influences frequently found ways to manage their incorporation into the *oikoumene* and adapt or adjust to the multifaceted influences that conversion brought with it. The conversion encounters between steppe Arabs and the wandering holy men who, on the basis of extant narratives, introduced them to the new religion, formed an aspect of the larger process of cultural interaction between Roman and barbarian. Conceived, too, as an integral fragment of a “borderlands” scenario, located within porous frontier zones which lacked any obvious political, cultural or religious character, this apparently simplistic conversion universe where barbarian achieved civilisation reveals, instead, multiple levels of accommodation, compromise, resistance and interaction. Studies of pre-modern colonial borderlands, in particular, have usefully identified the ways in which Christianity could be received and adapted to pre-existing religious systems, and, as well, the subversive means by which its introduction altered familiar world views and ways of organising local space (Lieu, 2004: 303; Hefner, 1993b: 10; Adelman & Aron, 1999: 814–841; Radding, 1997; Barth, 1969; Barth, 2000: 17–36; Morehouse, 2004: 29). Rather than trying to prove the existence of an event which we might identify as “true” conversion (Nock, 1933: 7; Mol, 1976: 76) or focusing on the unsteady argument that indigenes adopted Christianity out of a desire to be assimilated within its evangelical truths, it is instead more fruitful to explore the creation and maintenance of a “middle ground” as both the locus and product of the conversion encounters themselves (White, 1991: 59–93). Within such a zone of accommodation and adaptation, the superficial realignment to Christianity (manifested by worship, not always a corollary to belief) provided access to the macrocosm, the wider imperial world with new socio-economic, cultural and political opportunities (Frede & Athanassiadi, 1999: 20; Hefner, 1993b: 21). Importantly, the addition of Christianity did not necessarily entail a dramatic reorganisation of personal religious landscapes. “Syncretistic” practice, whereby the presence of numinous deities of non-Christians were no hindrance to the addition of a new religious force