

**The Making of Christian  
Communities in  
Late Antiquity and the  
Middle Ages**



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Mark Williams



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# The Making of Christian Communities

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# Preface

Giles Constable

There were many types and layers of community, both secular and religious, in the ancient world. Starting with the family, to mention only the most obvious, the secular communities built up through the household, the town and the regions to the empire, which in theory embraced the entire *oikoumene*. Cutting across these communities were those of language, ethnic origins and occupation, which brought together people of diverse origins and background. The religious communities clustered around various temples and shrines sometimes coincided with broader regional and ethnic cults culminating in the cult of the emperor, to whom all inhabitants of the empire, including Jews and Christians, were expected to make sacrifices. The cult of the emperor survived the Christianization of the empire without radical transformation and was appropriated by the Christians because, according to Glen Bowersock, 'it succeeded in making multitudes of citizens in far-flung regions feel close to the power that controlled them.'<sup>1</sup> Together with Roman law, the imperial cult made the empire into a single vast community.

Into this complex hierarchy of overlapping communities Christianity acted at the same time as a solvent of traditional communities and as the creator of new ones. Jesus himself undermined the strength of the family when he promised everlasting life to 'everyone that both left home or brethren or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands for my name's sake'<sup>2</sup> and warned that one of His disciples must hate 'his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters'.<sup>3</sup> The new type of Christian community was described in the Acts of the Apostles, which said that 'The multitude of believers had but one heart and one soul. Neither did any one say that aught of the things

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he possessed was his own; but all things were common unto them.<sup>4</sup> These words were an inspiration not only for Christians during persecutions but for religious communities after the recognition of Christianity; they remained programmatic for monasteries throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> At least two of the articles in this volume, those by Chrysogonus Waddell and E Rozanne Elder, are concerned with the monastic sense of community in the twelfth century. The former examines the importance of the liturgy and a written rule in binding a community together and linking it to other traditions. The latter shows how a regional group of abbots, many with a common background, were united in their concern for monastic reform.

The other articles explore a wide variety of types and levels of Christian community in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Several emphasize the importance of buildings, tombs, statues, relics, holy men, processions, and other ceremonies – what Oliver Nicholson calls the ‘Christian appropriation of the landscape’. The emperor continued to be a focus of community, especially in the East and at times in the West, where Charlemagne’s court served as ‘the originator and focal point of friendship’ and brought together like-minded men from all over the Latin West. The ‘community of love’ embraced the dead as well as the living: confraternities of prayer included not only members of families (and *familia* in a broader sense) and of religious institutions, but also all baptized Christians, for the salvation of whose souls prayers were offered. Beginning in the Carolingian period, many monasteries formed associations with other religious houses, and with lay men and women outside their walls. In some respects these paralleled guilds, which originated as societies designed to ensure proper burial for their members and intercessory prayers after they died, as well as mutual support in the present life.

Brian Stock has emphasized the importance of textual communities.<sup>6</sup> They are represented here by the Gothic commentary on the Bible, which showed a ‘reverence for the Word’ and linked the Goths to the broad theological trends in the fourth century, and by the Icelanders, whose poetry reflected their conversion to Christianity and the importance of the ties between poets and patrons in Icelandic society. Another sort of intellectual and spiritual community is shown in Brian McGuire’s article on the new view of Joseph in the late Middle Ages. Each period had its characteristic saints who represented shifting religious and social ideals and gathered followers and admirers who made up the pattern of communities.

The variety and richness of these articles thus point the way for a new approach to the concept and reality of community in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. These communities, such as those of the emperor and the Christian God, often overlapped and were a source of tension. The ideals of 'one heart and one soul', and of common property, remained strong on the local level but sometimes conflicted with the interests of other communities, including the parishes and dioceses, and even the papacy. Particular communities, such as groups of heretics and those on the borderlines of heresy, showed the divisive as well as the unifying force of the concept of community. Not all these aspects are studied in this volume, but it helps to open up an important and largely unexplored area of Christian history.

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# Introduction

Mark Williams

The rise and spread of Christianity in the Roman and post-Roman world has been exhaustively studied on many different levels, political, legal, social, literary and religious. Christianity's displacement of various forms of polytheism has been heralded as a unique spiritual advance, as well as condemned as leading to the decline of the Roman empire. Amid these larger questions of empire-wide import, the basic question of how Christians of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages formed themselves into communities of believers has sometimes been lost from sight. Yet it was a question of which these Christians themselves were acutely – and sometimes acrimoniously – aware.

There were many sources of the debate among Christians on how they should order their communities. St Paul often commented on how his readers should relate both to one another and to those outside the Christian orbit. This was no trivial question for, as has been noted, Christianity was unique in being a spiritual system into which one could not be born (at least in principle), but which one had to choose to follow. As adherents of a religion with its origins both within Judaism and at the same time outside traditional polytheistic beliefs, Christians had almost no choice but to organize themselves into more or less separate communities; Christianity's survival as a faith depended upon this as much as upon any official or unofficial tolerance that Christians might have enjoyed. Once heresy became a problem, Christian leaders had to deal not just with the question of who was and who wasn't a Christian, but with what to do with those who had for some reason gone astray or even abandoned the true faith. Again, once Christianity became a legitimate and empire-wide faith of Rome, other problems of community-formation became pressing: what about those who might have embraced the faith for the wrong reasons? How did one decide

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that these were the wrong reasons? It cannot have been easy for the faith of the martyrs to become the faith of their former persecutors – on either side.

On the level of personal relationships, even, the coming of Christianity caused tensions that brought changes. In republican and imperial Rome the term *amicitia* had always had a broad range of meanings, from what we might today refer to as ‘character friendship’, in which the relationship is cemented by the virtues shown by each friend,<sup>1</sup> to ‘benefit friendship’, in which each maintains friendly relations with the other based upon the benefits that accrue to each side, to an ‘alliance’, in which the relationship of *amicitia* describes an agreement among businessmen or politicians or even families contemplating a dynastic marriage between their children. Of course, Cicero’s *De amicitia* provides the theoretical framework which described these pagan Roman concepts of friendly relations between individuals and groups and upon which they ultimately came to depend; because of this, Cicero’s essay and related works also provided for the early Christians exempla of the sorts of relationships which they hoped to emulate, if not surpass. For example, Aelred of Rievaulx’s dialogue *De spiritali amicitia* assumes a Ciceronian starting point for its discussion of friendship, but Aelred and his interlocutors are eager to show how Christianity allowed and even demanded that true, spiritual friendship be extended to more than just a few people. This, Aelred claimed, proved the superiority of Christian over pagan friendships, since pagan antiquity could offer only a few pairs of paradigmatic friends, while Christians could point to innumerable martyrs who laid down their lives for their friends in the faith.<sup>2</sup> So even at the level of personal relationships, those foundations of larger community, we can discern a sometimes curious mixture of the old Roman and the new Christian, sometimes uneasily blended but still, despite the volatility, a formulation that endured and evolved during the Middle Ages.

So, for the Christians of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the term ‘Christian community’ had a range of meanings, not all of them necessarily consistent. To ascetics like Jerome and John Cassian, the ideal of community had a clear and unambiguous meaning. Yet the pains Cassian takes in his *Institutes* and *Conferences* to commend this ideal to an audience of Gallo-Roman readers suggests that Cassian’s works are at least as apologetic as they are ascetic; most visions of golden ages – and this is how Cassian viewed Egyptian monastics<sup>3</sup> – tend to be apologetic or even polemical. Moreover, Jerome’s opinion of the secular clergy is positively hostile.<sup>4</sup> It is plain that Cassian and his

allies in the Latin west faced an uphill battle in arguing for an ascetic conception of Christian community, especially since the heresy of Cassian's older contemporary Priscillian had been associated with extreme ascetic practices as well as with sorcery, sexual immorality and scriptural irregularity. (Interestingly, Christians were not above making charges against one another of almost precisely the sort that their own pagan adversaries had made against them before the Constantinian revolution.) Once monasticism had become more widely accepted in the Latin west of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, attempts were constantly made by secular authorities to render monks less of a social threat than they were ordinarily perceived to be; thus, among other actions, a statute was enacted in 390 AD banning monks from cities and towns, probably with the aim of preventing them from taking part in theological debates in urban settings. Earlier, a letter of Valentinian I, Valens and Gratian forbade monks to seek legacies from widows.<sup>5</sup> The continued official efforts of secular authorities to control the activities of ascetics suggests a basic difference of opinion between them on the nature and province of Christian community.

To Christian aristocrats like Paulinus of Nola and Sulpicius Severus, to say nothing of men like Sidonius Apollinaris, the ideal of Christian community meant something else altogether from what it meant to monastic apologists, however much these men claimed to have been influenced by asceticism. Despite their apparent receptiveness to ascetic ideals, it would be hard to conceive of Christians who stood further from the ideals of Cassian's Egyptian exemplars than Paulinus and Sidonius. For example, Paulinus condemns one of the messengers of Sulpicius (a wretch named Marracinus) in his twenty-second epistle, outwardly for his failure to adopt both the outward and the inner trappings of monasticism, but the whole style of the letter suggests that Paulinus's censure arises originally as much from Paulinus's upper-class view of Marracinus's social climbing as from Paulinus's own Christian principles. Indeed, as Robert Bartlett has suggested,<sup>6</sup> the spread of Christianity in Europe was always associated with the spread of bishoprics loyal (though sometimes uneasily so) to the bishop of Rome and to the liturgy he represented. To the extent that these bishoprics were the purview of the aristocracy (however it was defined), they represented a continuation of types of Christian community that can be traced back to Roman ideas and ideals.<sup>7</sup> And if this lineage holds, then the tensions that existed among clerics, bishops and the papacy can trace their lineage back to the Roman world as well.

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It is probably trivial to remark now on the tensions between continuity and change that marked the end of Antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages, not least because such tensions mark every age and every culture. Yet studies of these tensions and the communities that both gave rise to them and endured them are instructive. It was such an interest – or rather, a group of related interests – that gave rise to the conference held at Calvin College in November 1998; the theme of the conference was ‘The Making of Christian Communities’. The essays in this book are the result of that conference. Each of the authors whose work is represented here addressed some aspect of Christian community; each ties in with the great themes of continuity and change that forced Christians of all stripes at various times to confront their assumptions about the things that drew them together as well as those that drove them apart. For example, in the first paper, Raymond Van Dam addresses the disruptive influence of Christianity in Cappadocia during the later Roman empire. For the leading churchmen of the area, including Basil of Caesarea, Christianization meant wrenching the local histories of Cappadocia out of their original Roman contexts and relocating them into different narratives of ecclesiastical and biblical history. According to Van Dam’s reading, the Christianization of Cappadocia led not simply to tension with the pre-existing Roman order, but even to subverting it.

Similarly, Oliver Nicholson’s ‘Constantinople: Christian Community, Christian Landscape’ contrasts the development of Christian culture at Byzantium against the notions of divine protection of cities that underlay much pagan devotion in late antiquity. Christian rejection of pagan claims to divine protection led in many instances to persecution, but on the other hand the idea of divine protection of a city by the Christian God lay at the back of much of Constantinople’s development as a Christian metropolis, as well as behind larger changes in Mediterranean culture in general.

In ‘Communities of the Living and the Dead in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages’, Frederick Paxton explores the complexities of relations between the living and the dead from the third to the tenth centuries. The main sources of this complexity appear to have been familial and social relations, which intruded upon what may seem at first to be a relatively simple matter of spiritual relations within the community of faith. The Church’s response to these tensions involved the creation of an ideal of community between the living and the dead, mediated by the Church.

The Goths get their due as intellectuals and theologians in James



W Marchand's essay 'The Gothic Intellectual Community: The Theology of the *Skeireins*'. Though perhaps best known as missionaries to the other Germanic tribes, the Goths produced biblical translators and exegetes, not to mention Christian polemicists.<sup>8</sup> The fragmentary (and much mistreated) commentary on the gospel of John, the *Skeireins* can and should be taken as emblematic of the Goths' talents for exegesis and places them firmly in the mainstream of Biblical exegesis of the fourth century.

In 'Seed-Sowers of Peace: The Uses of Love and Friendship at the Court and in the Kingdom of Charlemagne', C Stephen Jaeger turns our attention to a more personal form of community between Christians. Although love and friendship were court ideals throughout the Middle Ages, these virtues were especially important at the court of Charlemagne. Jaeger analyses poems, letters, and other documents to show that friendship created community at the royal court and was adopted as a communal ideal throughout the kingdom. The focus of Jaeger's paper is on Alcuin, who called those engaged in the project of courtly friend- and peace-making 'seed-sowers of peace'.

The Calvin conference coincided roughly with the thousandth anniversary of the conversion of Iceland to Christianity. Ásdís Egilsdóttir commemorates the occasion in her paper 'Scaldic Poetry and Early Christianity'. Focusing upon a number of the key scaldic poets, Einar Skulason and Gamli the Canon, Egilsdóttir explores the tensions that arose as the newly arrived Christian religion influenced the intricate poetic diction of scaldic verse, which had its roots in pre-Christian myth.

Of the many religious communities founded in the twelfth century, one of the most remarkable was the abbey of the Paraclete (near Nogent), founded as a community of women religious in 1129 when Abælard, abbot of St-Gildas-de-Ruy in Brittany, invited Heloise and a group of nuns expelled from Argenteuil to found a religious community around an abandoned oratory. Chrysogonus Waddell OCSO explores the role of Heloise in his contribution 'Heloise and the Abbey of the Paraclete' by concentrating upon the monastic institutes for the abbey that were almost certainly composed by Heloise herself. The portrait of Heloise that emerges from Waddell's study is of a woman who is practical, free and independent in judgment, and innovative within a traditional monastic context.

In 'Communities of Reform in the Province of Reims: The Benedictine "Chapter General" of 1131', E Rozanne Elder explores the events surrounding the remarkable synod of 1131 in Reims, which involved Pope Innocent II, King Louis VI of France, Archbishop Reynaud of Reims,

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and over three hundred bishops and abbots of his province, along with courts and councillors. One aspect of this synod was a gathering of Benedictine abbots – perhaps as many as 21 of them – in chapter. This was 84 years before chapters general were mandated by the Fourth Lateran Council. What accounts for this seemingly extraordinary event? Traditional interpretations have pointed at the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux, whose Cistercian order used chapters general. However, Elder explores other possible motivations for this synod besides the influence of Bernard.

Jean Gerson, perhaps best known today as chancellor of the University of Paris, wrote poems and treatises about St Joseph as the father of Jesus. Brian Patrick McGuire examines Gerson's treatment of Joseph in 'When Jesus Did the Dishes: The Transformation of Late Medieval Spirituality'. Gerson treated St Joseph not as a virtually comic figure or even a fool who could not comprehend the Incarnation, but as a male spiritual figure of use to a church that suffered from an imbalance between female affective spirituality and male abstract pursuits. For Gerson, St Joseph represented a balanced, chaste virgin father who could be a focus for the renewal of religious life for contemporary secular clergy.

In closing, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to all of those who made the Christian Communities conference at Calvin College a possibility. The former director of the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, my colleague and friend Professor Ronald Wells, guided the application for funding from the very beginning and was the conference's indispensable mentor; his successor at the Center, Professor James Bratt, has taken up where Ron left off, providing encouragement as the papers have made their way at last into print. The support staff of the Calvin Center, Ms Donna Romanowski and Ms Amy Bergsma, have been ever-present though virtually unseen aids at every step along the way, from arranging food and accommodations for participants to wrestling with and ultimately reconciling papers in multiple formats as they arrived from the contributors. Finally, I am sure that I speak for all the contributors and participants in thanking Professor John Traupman, for undertaking to put forward this volume of papers, and to Tom Penn and the rest of the staff at Anthem Press, whose work has made this book better in every way.

Mark F Williams  
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March, 2001

## Chapter I

# The Disruptive Impact of Christianity in Late Roman Cappadocia

Raymond Van Dam

The successful spread of Christianity into the Roman empire has long been one of the most intriguing and most challenging of issues for ancient historians and patristics scholars. The challenge has always been to invent an explanation that is neither so generalized that it becomes historically meaningless, nor so precise that it has no relevance beyond a few specific examples. Modern studies of the rise of Christianity typically start at the beginning of the process by outlining the factors that distinguished Christianity from rival religious cults and that made Christian beliefs and behavior somehow more attractive, more acceptable, more desirable. In his *Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, still an influential account a century after its publication, the great patristics scholar Adolf Harnack explained the success of Christianity in terms of a whole list of attributes, among them more aggressive proselytism, more attractive doctrines, more attractive institutions of charity and social assistance, and better organization. From the beginning Christianity 'possessed, nay, it was, everything that can possibly be considered as religion'.<sup>1</sup>

Such a triumphalist account is, of course, already wholly compromised. With our unavoidably retrospective viewpoint we historians are always one step behind, as we explain the obvious and account for the evident. At the time, both in the early Roman empire and well into Late Antiquity after the conversion of emperors, the eventual success of Christianity was not a necessary, nor even a predictable outcome. In the later fourth century men still ridiculed Christianity for its beliefs and its behavior. As Basil of Caesarea once preached about the end of the world and the regeneration of life through God's judgment, some in his audience 'let loose a loud guffaw'.<sup>2</sup> Only in retrospect does that mockery seem hollow. Christianity was furthermore not very widespread. The

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recent efforts to improve the standing of Christianity by claiming that by the early fourth century it was already prominent in Roman society are merely modern attempts to create a context that downplays the genuine surprise of the Emperor Constantine's decision to ally himself with Christianity.

During the fourth century Christianity was still not immediately acceptable, and it was still a cult with serious limitations. Its success, even with the patronage of emperors, was certainly not assured. One other factor also hinted at the difficulty of its spread. Often the practices and beliefs of Christianity conflicted with local traditions and conventional practices. Because of the writings of the three Cappadocian Fathers, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, the region of Cappadocia (as well as the neighboring region of Pontus) is well enough documented during the fourth century to serve as a test case. Cappadocia is seemingly an odd selection as a test case, since in the history of the ancient classical world it had consistently been peripheral, on the geographical edges of the lowlands and coastal regions where great civilizations and cultures flourished, on the political margins of the great kingdoms and empires. In the highlands of central and eastern Asia Minor the spread of Greek culture and the imposition of Roman rule had not been all that successful or thorough. The determined survival of local customs and indigenous languages had undermined the possibility of cultural uniformity, and the lingering commonness of so-called bandits had highlighted the limitations of administrative totality. Well into Late Antiquity the outback of Cappadocia remained under-Hellenized and under-Romanized. This inability to introduce Greek culture or to impose effective imperial rule was a preview of the limited impact of Christianity in the region. Even with the support of emperors Christians could anticipate the survival of pagan cults and the appearance of variant forms of Christianity.

Nor were church leaders very adept at accommodating local customs and indigenous traditions. Because churchmen like the Cappadocian Fathers often preferred to confront native practices and beliefs, the spread of Christianity was thoroughly disruptive in local society. This chapter is a brief introduction to some of the consequences of this disruption in Cappadocia during the fourth century. Christian churchmen introduced new regulations about acceptable behavior, for instance regarding permissible marriages, and they imposed a new hierarchy of clerics and bishops who all served for life. These new standards conflicted with traditional patterns of marriage, and with the usual expect-

tations of rapid turnover among most magistrates and priests (Section 1). Because churchmen had limited means of enforcement, they had to find a legitimation for this new morality and new hierarchy instead in the rhythms of history and the characteristics of the natural environment (Section 2). The intrusive impact of Christianity did not stop with introducing and then legitimating new behavior, however. These new histories and new legends themselves became disruptive, as they crowded out the old legends and myths that cities and families already used to explain their cults and their prominence (Section 3). In many cases all that remained by the later fourth century were disconnected fragments of these old legends. One such myth had apparently highlighted the original ancestor of all Cappadocians, the mysterious Mosoch the Founder (Section 4).

The issue here is not merely the rise of different fads in historical interpretation, a process with which modern historians are all too familiar. Instead, facts, content, data vanished wholesale. In order to introduce and justify new behavior and new expectations, communities had to imagine themselves differently. The rise of Christianity resulted in both the remembering of new, more relevant legends and the forgetting of old, outdated legends.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. New Patterns of Behavior

In the mid-370s Basil responded to a series of questions from another bishop about discipline and penance. Basil's replies took the form of a long series of chapters or canons, which in modern editions are numbered consecutively through three of his letters.<sup>4</sup> Most of these questions sought advice on the penalties for various sins and misdeeds. Since some of the questions mentioned specific cases and specific people, it is possible to assume that they were raising genuine issues of immediate concern for the pastoral duties of bishops. Several of these canons discussed the penalties for clerics who had committed sins, such as sexual misbehavior. The common penalty for such wayward clerics was the loss of their offices: 'the [previous ecclesiastical] canons order a single penalty to be applied to fallen [clerics], dismissal from their office'.<sup>5</sup> Basil suggested that clerics who took up arms against bandits should be deposed from their offices,<sup>6</sup> while priests who had unwittingly become involved in an 'illegal marriage' should be prevented from performing their clerical duties, although they could keep their offices.<sup>7</sup> He likewise suggested that priests and deacons who had expressed