

Conference Report

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CONFERENCE TITLE: FROM BYZANTIUM TO CLONTARF: TENTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE AUSTRALIAN EARLY MEDIEVAL ASSOCIATION

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INTRODUCTION

On the 7th and 8th of February 2014 the Australian Early Medieval Association held its tenth annual conference at Macquarie University in Sydney. The conference was held in the Museum of Ancient Cultures, which graciously opened their collection to attendees during breaks in the conference.¹ The conference took its name from the battles of Clontarf in Ireland and Kleidion in Bulgaria both of which will mark their one-thousandth anniversaries this year alongside the anniversary of a much more recent war. While the battles provided some sense of the breadth of topics explored, the

¹ In addition to its excellent collection of antiquities the Museum's climate controlled environment proved a pleasant respite for conference delegates unused to the fierce Sydney heat.

conference was not the preserve of martial themes. Indeed the conveners sought papers that explored ‘the emotional, intellectual, spiritual, or cultural aspects of written and non-written sources of the Late Antique and Early Medieval periods (c. 400–1150).’ This ensured a wide range of topics were brought up for discussion from Gallo-Roman clergy to Viking merchants. I made an academic pilgrimage myself from New Zealand and enjoyed two thoroughly stimulating days of discussion.²

FRIDAY: DAY 1

SESSION 1 – HAGIOGRAPHY, HOLY MEN, AND EMOTION

The conference opened with a session that explored the emotional worlds of early-Christian holy men. **John Simmons** of Macquarie University started the session with a paper entitled ‘Animals in Celtic and Greek hagiographic traditions’. Starting with the Old Irish poem, *The Scholars Cat*, and continuing to the world of Greek hagiography, John examined thoughts about animals and the nature of their souls and the roles animals played in the lives of saints. A particularly pertinent observation was that while Irish hagiography focused on saints helping animals, Greek Hagiography focused on animals helping saints.

Jonathan M. Wooding from the University of Sydney presented a paper titled ‘The Emotional World of the Early British and Irish *peregrine*’. Jonathan’s paper sought to reframe discourse on the lives of holy-men around their personal lives rather than their symbolic roles in hagiography. Texts such as the *Confessio* of St. Patrick offer deeper insights into the emotional world of saints than is usually portrayed in their lives. The paper considered ‘how we might further reflect constructively on the emotional dimension of the very powerful and personal act of religious self-exile’.

Lynette Olson, also of the University of Sydney, presented a paper entitled ‘Emotions at a World Turned Upside Down’ which examined the emotions of Latin writers in an increasingly post-Roman world. Works considered included Sidonius Apollinaris’s letters on the siege of Clermont, Salvian’s *On the Governance of God* and Patrick’s *Confessio*. A key focal point was the expression of regret by writers in an increasingly post-Roman world. This paper sought to define just what these Roman writers regretted losing and the manner in which they coped with a changing world.

SESSION 2 – LATE ANTIQUE GAUL

² The following report is based on the abstracts contained in the conference programme and my own notes taken during the conference. I would like to thank the conference organisers Janet Wade and Nicole Moffatt both for their efforts organising an excellent conference and for permitting me to report on it. Readers can find more information about the Australian Early Medieval Association on the Association’s website: www.aema.net.au

Much to this author's delight the first morning of the conference offered a great deal to those interested in Late Antique Gaul. In addition to featuring in papers of the first session, Gallic writers and history comprised the subject of the second session. **Geoffrey Dunn** of the Australian Catholic University kicked off proceedings with 'Flavius Constantius and Affairs in Gaul between AD 411 - 417'. Geoffrey presented a counter argument to narratives which see Constantius involved in the creation of Gallic episcopates that would be friendly to him. His paper argued that Constantius was not actively involved in episcopal affairs in Gaul as has been argued by David Frye; rather *c.* 414 Constantius was too preoccupied dealing with the Goths in Narbonne and events in Africa to be heavily involved with the affairs of the Gallic church.

Daniel Knox from the University of Auckland presented 'Bibliophiles and Bishops', which examined the use of classical literary traditions and the interest in book collecting in Gallo-Roman letter-collections of the late fifth and early sixth century. The paper presented examples from the letter collections of Sidonius Apollinaris and Ruricius of Limoges of non-Gallo-Roman elites participating in Gallo-Roman literary culture and argued against an idea of cultural exclusivity in these networks.

Susan Loftus of Macquarie University delivered a paper called 'Suitable Men to Enter the Episcopate in Late Antique Gaul: Ideal and Reality'. This paper looked at the perceived requirements for Gallic episcopal office in the fifth and sixth centuries through an examination of canon law, hagiography, letters and poetry. Susan considered the trend of Gallo-Roman aristocrats seeking episcopates in the fifth and sixth centuries due to a lack of civil positions and asked whether these men were 'canonically suitable' for the offices that they desired.

PLENARY SESSION 1

The conference was augmented by two plenary sessions. The first session was presented on day one by **Juanita Feros Ruys** of the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions at the University of Sydney and was titled 'Love and Trauma: the Emotional Classroom of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages'. The paper looked at the emotional world of the pre-modern classroom from Augustine through to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The emotional world of the student was considered in several ways: as something to be studied; as a means of study, particularly through the use of 'sexually suggestive material' as set texts; and as a result of study. Further to this, a wide range of emotions were considered, including 'desire for knowledge, joy of learning, curiosity, fear, rivalry and jealousy, confusion, and self-doubt'. In addition consideration was given to the phenomena of 'love of the master' hero worship which could be both a boon and a curse for pre-modern students. Finally the session examined how the 'emotional matrix of the classroom' could have lasting effects for the student and their resultant self-image. Resplendent with tales from the

classroom this plenary session stimulated discussion greatly, and provided an excellent cap to the first day's proceedings.

EXCURSION TO THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM AND DARLING HARBOUR

On the afternoon of day one conference delegates were treated to an excursion to Sydney's Powerhouse museum where we were given a tour of items in the museum's extensive storage facility. This behind the scenes tour allowed delegates to view a number of medieval items which unfortunately do not feature in the museum's regular displays. The curators arranged a number of items for us to view including personal items such as shoes, combs and lamps, weapons including a sword from the ninth century, and an extensive collection of coins. In addition to the medieval items the curators were more than happy to show us other items that caught our eye in the storage facility. The tour was an excellent addition to the conference schedule and resulted in many excited medievalists. Having said our goodbyes to the staff at the Powerhouse we proceeded to nearby Darling Harbour where we enjoyed an excellent conference dinner on a wonderfully warm summer's night.³

SATURDAY: DAY 2

Day two of the conference saw the programme expand to two parallel sessions so I was unable to attend all of the papers presented.⁴

SESSIONS 3A AND 3B

The morning session was comprised of two panels: 'Looking Back' and 'Old English Poetry'. **Raymond Harding** of Macquarie University opened 'Looking Back' with 'A Re-examination of the Relationship of Theatre and the Church over the First Four Centuries of the Christian Era'. Raymond examined the hostility of church leaders towards dramatic arts such as mime and pantomime and argued that rather than stemming solely from a moral position, that church leaders were concerned by the competition that secular entertainments presented to church attendance. The paper considered the attitudes of a number of church fathers including Tertullian, Augustine, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Jacob of Serugh.

³ Australian delegates took the opportunity over dinner to engage the author in a linguistic study of the New Zealand accent and dialect; many were amazed at the complexity of the phrase 'yeah, nah'.

⁴ In addition some last minute cancellations/changes to the schedule mean that some of the papers discussed here were not presented or not presented by their author. In some respects this then represents an idealization of the schedule as initially planned.

Nicole Moffatt also of Macquarie University presented 'You've got mail!: Networking a New Identity in Late Antiquity'. Nicole presented a social network analysis of letters and elite epistolary society from the mid-fourth to mid-fifth centuries AD. Nicole's paper mapped out the network of elite correspondents and considered 'their accumulation of social capital through the development and compliance with an epistolary code'. The result was an empire-wide network of connected elites who had carved out a position in elite society through mutual action.

The session was rounded out with a paper from **Chris Bishop** of the Australian National University entitled 'Hal Foster's Prince Valiant' which took us on a journey through one of the twentieth century's most well-known comic strips 'Prince Valiant' and examined the underlying obsession with medievalism which pervaded both the comic and American culture in the twentieth century. Chris's paper took its audience on a journey through the fascinating world of American print media and the impact of Hal Foster's work on our imagination and knowledge of the medieval world.

'Old English Poetry' began with **Erica Steiner** of the University of Sydney and 'The Barrow-Dweller in *Beowulf*: An Anglo-Scandinavian Context'. This paper considered the concept of the undead barrow-dweller or *draugar* and looked specifically at the examples of Grendel and his mother in *Beowulf*. The pre-Christian context of the *draugar* was compared to the Christian context of *Beowulf* and its audience and arguments were made for the dating of the work to the tenth-century Danelaw.

Anna Wallace of the University of Sydney presented a paper titled 'Questions of Temporal Authenticity in Cynewulf's *Elené*'. The chief concern of this paper was the incorrect date of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge that forms the starting point of the poem. Anna argued that Cynewulf took the date from his Latin source while knowing that it was incorrect. The importance of the date was considered with regards to the 'implied historical authenticity' of the work and the theme of competition between oral and written sources which feature in the poem. In addition Cynewulf's use of the erroneous date was examined in relation to 'medieval number symbolism' and the contrast between earthly and heavenly time.

April Bertels-Garnsey, also of the University of Sydney, finished the session with 'In that Bright City Where My Brother Is: Family, Geography, and Conflict in the Old English *Andreas* and *Elené*'. The paper examined the urban contexts of Jerusalem and Mermedonia in the poems and the Anglo-Saxon imagination and the themes of brotherhood and family relations which both poems explore. The emphasis on spiritual brotherhood in the *Andreas* was compared with the real brotherhood of the *Elene*. Ultimately the paper considered the interaction between urbanity and insularity and family relationships in the poems and the importance of these themes to the poems Anglo-Saxon audience.

After a pleasant morning tea the action continued with two sessions titled 'Punishment, Shame, and the Business of War' and 'Perceptions and Realities'.⁵ **Tahlia Birnbaum** from the University of Sydney opened the 'Punishment, Shame, and the Business of War' session with a paper entitled 'Humiliation, Vikings, and the Construction of Shame in Late Anglo-Saxon England'. Two different types of shame were examined in this paper: the shame associated with sin and repentance and that associated with poor conduct on the battlefield. The focus was on late Anglo-Saxon authors and their use of shame as a rhetorical device aimed at modifying the behaviours of their audience.

Samuel Cardwell from Monash University continued with 'Providence and Punishment: Narratives of Northumbrian Defeat in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*'. This paper sought to reconcile the narrative of Northumbrians as a 'chosen people' in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* with the narratives of three major Northumbrian defeats at the hands of pagan Mercians, heretical Britons, and Picts. While the defeat at Nechtansmere is justified as a punishment for hubris, the defeats at Hatfield Chase and Maserfield present more complex problems to readers.

The session was completed with a paper from **Rod McDonald** titled 'Viking Business at the Battle of Clontarf'. A comparison was struck between the Vikings of Dublin who reportedly joined in the Battle of Clontarf and the second generation Viking merchants of the same city. Warrior Rhetoric was contrasted with economic reality in this exploration of Viking life in Dublin. The paper invited delegates to consider the mundane world of the Viking merchant through the medium of guide texts which illustrated model behaviours and routines versus the macho propaganda of Viking warriors.

Meanwhile 'Perceptions and Realities' was the theme of the concurrent session. **Janet Wade** presented 'Lock up Your Valuables: Perceptions of Sailors and Sea-Merchants in Port Cities of Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium'. This paper sought to discover if the traditionally bad reputation of sailors and sea-merchants ought to be challenged. Consideration was given to secular and ecclesiastical attitudes to mariners with a focus on laws regarding these individuals. The transient nature of sailors was contrasted with the settled identities of the ports that they frequented and the question was asked as to whether they had a more prominent role in shaping the identity of these places than is traditionally assigned to them.

Hollie Thomas from the University of Queensland continued with '*Dustscearung* and Perceptions of Roman Remains in Anglo-Saxon England'. This paper examined 'the extent to which the contemplation of dust (*Dustscearung*) can be linked to *Romanitas*'. The focus of the paper was the Old English poem *The Ruin*. P. John Frankis has argued that the use of the phrase *enta geweorc* (the work of giants) represents knowledge on the part of the author that the ruins described in the poem were Roman. This was contrasted with Christopher Abram's argument that a correlation may be seen between *The Ruin* and Venantius Fortunatus' poem *De excidio Thuringiae*. From this point Hollie

⁵ The author was delighted to find that the conference was well catered and a discussion readily ensued over the differences and similarities between Australian and New Zealand biscuits.

questioned the extent to which *Dustsceawung* can be linked to an Anglo-Saxon knowledge of *Romanitas*.

Penelope Nash of the University of Sydney completed the session with 'Contemporary Perceptions of the Actions of Tenth Century European Elites'. This paper compared the published image of tenth century elites with the often more brutal reality of these individuals. In particular this paper examined the favourable portrayal of queens and powerful aristocratic women in Germany and Italy by their chroniclers. These women were often calculating and power hungry yet their chroniclers preserved far more noble images of self which lasted into the High and Later Middle ages preserving a mythologised version of their aims and motives.

SESSIONS 5A AND 5B

The final pairing of regular sessions were titled 'Images and Memory' and 'Law, Intellect, and Humanity' respectively. **Jay Johnston** of the Universities of Sydney and New South Wales presented 'Interpreting the Role and Agency of Images in Insular Manuscript and Amulet Traditions'.⁶ The paper sought to take a holistic approach to the reading of the *Book of Deer* and other insular manuscripts. This approach aims to treat images and design elements with the same focus as is usually applied to textual elements. In addition the paper explored the impact of Mediterranean iconographic traditions on the development of insular manuscripts and amulet traditions in early Christian Britain.

Valentina De Pasca of the University of Milan presented 'Byzantine Influence in Lombard Jewellery Production: Materials from Castel Trosino and Nocera Umbra (Italy)'.⁷ The paper examined the Byzantine influence on Lombard jewellery discovered in two Italian Necropoli and argued that Byzantine cultural influences penetrated further than the Empire's own territories and into the cultural contexts of societies on the periphery, who despite having separate cultural traditions could not 'resist the charms aesthetic and symbolic of Byzantium'.

John D'Alton from Monash University concluded the session on 'Images and Memory' with 'Maximus to Eriugena: Memories of Ps. Dionysius from Constantinople to France'. This paper examined the 'memory and appropriation' of Aristotle, Plato, and Ps. Dionysius in the seventh and eighth centuries by Maximus the Confessor of Constantinople and Johannes Scotus Eriugena. The paper rejected the thirteenth century rediscovery of Aristotle in favour of a more gradual transmission and explored the impact of Greco-Roman ideas from Constantinople to Ireland.

⁶ Unfortunately this paper was not presented at the conference.

⁷ Valentina was unable to present this paper personally but the paper was presented by Chris Haddad one of the conference assistants. I would like to thank Chris and Ellen Ryan for their dedicated assistance throughout the conference.

Session 5B 'Law, Intellect, and Humanity' was composed of two papers. The first was '*i.fri Saxonu: Saxon Incursions and Early Irish Law*' by **Pamela O'Neill** from the University of Sydney. Pamela's paper examined the early Irish legal text *Críth Gablach* and a clause contained within it which pertained to emergency powers that the king could use in order to expel foreign powers. In particular the case of Saxon incursions under Ecgfríð, king of Northumbria, was examined and the paper questioned whether the clause referred to particular incursions or general Saxon aggression.

Merrin Marks of the University of Sydney completed the session with 'Imagining Grendel's Mother: Human Woman or Female Monster?'. Unlike traditional readings of *Beowulf*, which treat Grendel's mother as an inhuman monster, this paper proposed that the poet intended for Grendel's mother to be portrayed as a human. The paper compared the portrayal in some translations of Grendel's mother as a she-troll and the use of similar terms to describe other human characters in a more positive light. This re-examination challenged traditional characterisations in the poem including that of Beowulf, as well as the portrayal of some traits as heroic and others as barbaric and evil.

PLENARY SESSION 2

The Conference closed with a second plenary session presented by **Ken Parry** of Macquarie University. The paper was titled 'Pierre Gilles' Constantinople: A Sixteenth Century Frenchman in the City of Suleyman the Magnificent'. This fascinating talk followed the adventures of the Frenchman Pierre Gilles as he attempted to uncover the topography of Constantine's city before it became the city of Suleyman the Magnificent. Gilles' *The Topography of Constantinople and its Antiquities* is a particularly useful resource for anyone interested in the City both under Constantine and later Justinian. Ken's paper was full of anecdotes from Gilles and his peregrinations about the city amidst the construction sites of Suleyman's great building projects. Pierre Gilles provides accounts of sites which were in the process of being transformed and is thus a crucial source for knowledge of the Byzantine city. This was a light and refreshing discussion which thoroughly gripped its audience providing a fitting end to an excellent conference.

SUMMARY

The Conference was closed by AEMA's vice president **Darius von Güttner** and awards were given for Best Postgraduate Paper as voted by the delegates and the Early Career Researcher Paper prize. Hollie Thomas won Best Postgraduate Paper and Penelope Nash was awarded the Early Career Researcher Paper prize. Overall the conference was a resounding success and the organisers deserve much credit for offering an exemplary performance. Discussion throughout the conference was robust and routinely spilled over into the breaks. The wide range of topics presented illustrated the

vitality of Early Medieval Studies in Australia and the diligence of the organisers. I thoroughly enjoyed my time at the conference and I am looking forward to the next AEMA conference.⁸

⁸ The 2015 conference is yet to be confirmed.