

CONCLUSION –

THE END OF THE WORLD IN FIRE

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Concepts relating to the end of the world figure in many written sources deriving from past cultures across a wide geographical space. Among these concepts is the widespread idea that the world will perish by fire. Despite the fact that there are some culturally specific traits in the various sources, some components of the concepts seem to be similar in many of these sources. Therefore, the question arises whether these concepts have developed independently and parallel in various eras and cultures – which could hint to a possible universal concept of a global conflagration – or whether the idea as a whole or at least some conceptual components of it have been borrowed from one culture and have been – with some conceptual changes – included in another. In the latter case, one could ask if and how the sources address the act of borrowing, for example, is the process made explicit or even used as a means of granting authority to an argument, or is the borrowing concealed? These are the leading questions that this section wished to answer through four case studies, each of them dealing with texts from different periods and cultural backgrounds, namely Latin and Greek writings from Classical Antiquity, as well as Old Iranian, Old Norse, and medieval Latin texts. For all these sources, it is a much-debated question where the idea of a global conflagration stems from, i.e., whether it originated one within each specific time and culture, or whether it was taken over from another culture directly or indirectly, possibly mediated through the ancient Greek and Roman writings that influenced all the others to a certain degree.

The contributions are in a roughly chronological order. The oldest sources treated here are those of the Greco-Roman antiquity. As Dominic Bärsch states in his first contribution to this section, the idea of the world's destructibility permeates Greek and Latin literature from its very beginnings with the natural philosophers of the 6th century BCE to the Christian authors of Late Antiquity, but was often especially associated with the Stoics. Since such a wealth of texts could not be dealt with in this article,¹ Dominic Bärsch focuses on two Christian authors in particular, namely Minucius Felix and Augustine of Hippo. Christian authors faced the challenge to integrate pre-existing pagan conceptions into their Christian faith, thus combining elements of Greco-Roman philosophy with Jewish and Christian doctrines. This (legitimate) use of pagan sources for the education in and the propagation of Christian faith is often referred to as *χρησις* ("*Chrêsis*"), a term introduced by Christian Gnülka.² In order to demonstrate that the end of the world in fire is likely, Minucius Felix and Augustine resort to different strategies of using pagan authorities. While the former argues in his dialogue *Octavius* that a global conflagration has not only been described in the Bible and by Christian authors but by numerous pagan philosophers as well, Augustine focuses especially on the Old and New Testament crediting the latter with more authority in his famous work *De civitate Dei*.

In the secondary literature, it is generally held that the ancient Greeks incorporated the concept of a global conflagration when they encountered the cultures of the Middle East. This *communis opinio* is challenged by Götz König in his contribution to this section. Quite on the contrary, he argues that in the oldest Iranian sources, the Avesta (first millennium BCE), the concept of the end of the world in fire was probably not a prominent feature. This concept seems to appear primarily in two older textual corpora of Pahlavi translation and commentaries of the Avesta in the Sasanian era (third to fifth centuries CE) and in Manichean writings from the third century CE onwards. Because Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic traditions profoundly influenced these traditions, it seems possible that the concept of the end of the world in fire might have even been borrowed from Greek sources and included into the Iranian religious texts. However, this is not mentioned explicitly in the sources and there are furthermore crucial differences between the Greco-Roman and the Iranian conceptions.

1 More on this topic can be found in his forthcoming PhD thesis.

2 GNÜLKA, 2012.

The third paper in the section, again by Dominic Bärsch, deals with the *Chronica sive Historia de duabus civitatibus* by the twelfth-century bishop and historiographer Otto von Freising. In Book 8 of this work, the medieval scholar describes the end of the world by an all-consuming fire. To support his claim that the so-called *Day of the Lord* is imminent, he cites numerous passages from Old and New Testaments, in addition to several texts by certain non-Christian authors. He attributes different degrees of authority to his sources, with biblical scripture and Christian authors (to which he refers to as *nostri*) being of the highest value, because – according to Otto – these have gained their knowledge directly from divine revelation. Non-Christian authors and philosophers making up the second group are also cited as relevant authorities. But since their understanding stems from experiments and the observation of nature, their knowledge does not share the same epistemic value attributed to that of the *nostri*.

In the last contribution to this section, Jens Peter Schjødt analyses the different concepts of the end of the world in Old Norse literature. The so-called Ragnarøk (“twilight of the gods”) myth appears in several sources each of which name various elements connected to the end of the world. One of these elements is a destruction by fire. Due to the fact that writing was only introduced with the coming of Christianity (in different steps roughly between the tenth to twelfth century), even sources written by persons from the respective culture describing Old Norse religions feature what is most probably a series of loans and influences from Christianity and other religious traditions. However, identifying exactly which were borrowed is difficult, if not impossible to answer. The destruction of the world by fire is often regarded as an element taken over from a Near Eastern religion – a view already challenged by Götz König in his contribution – because the destruction by heat would better fit into a hotter environment than Scandinavia. However, Schjødt argues against this *communis opinio* and refers to the prevalent practice of burning down houses and halls of the enemies as an act of war. The idea of an end of the world in an all-consuming fire might be taken over from practices associated with warfare, but this does not rule out other influences at work in tandem.

As the different contributions have shown, it is in general difficult to track down a single culturally specific source from which the idea of a global conflagration has originated. Furthermore, the claim that this concept spread from one area to many others is even more difficult to maintain. However,

only in a few instances are concepts referred to as explicitly dependent on preceding authorities, as in the text by the high medieval historian Otto von Freising. More often, one can identify connecting features in the sources that could possibly suggest a potential transfer of knowledge from one civilization to another. In particular, it has often been claimed that certain ideas have migrated from the cultures of the Near East to the West, to Greece especially. Similar generalizations are often postulated for the dissemination of ancient motifs in medieval cultures of Northern Europe: In the course of Christianization, those cultures have allegedly adopted certain motifs, thereby comprehensively changing their own paradigms. At this point, it is not our intention to question whether such cultural encounters and transfers occurred, but we want to point out that these deductions need to be treated with some caution. For the ancient Mediterranean, in particular, one should not postulate a sterile transfer of fixed concepts from East to West. It seems rather more fitting to suggest a rich cross-cultural community of shared tales and knowledge with permeable boundaries, as P. Henkelmann aptly states:

Greek texts rarely are a direct reflection of Akkadian, Sumerian or Aramaic literary texts, but should rather be seen as solidified samples taken from a broad stream of tales that were subject to constant adaption, variation and contamination and that circulated within an ancient cultural continuum stretching from the Aegean to Iran and beyond.³

From such a thesis follows quite naturally the conclusion that the individual cultures are not restricted to limited areas, illustrating instead that cultural boundaries were fluid and thoroughly transparent. Consequently, it emphasizes that by no means should we expect separate compartments of fixed knowledge, but rather a constant process of exchange and adaptation. Moreover, this approach is more appropriate for the sources presented in the individual contributions to this volume. Since these accounts always present hybrid formations – to use a term coined by H. Bhabha⁴ – it is in most cases simply not possible to identify the original elements of ideas – as previous approaches of *Quellenforschung* have often tried to accomplish. As demonstrated by Götz König, such classical approaches encounter the problem that it is frequently difficult to decide which culture has influenced the other. Although hybrids present concepts that stem from different traditions, they can, according to

3 HENKELMANN, 2010, p. 323f.

4 Cf. BHABHA, 1994.

Bhabha's theory, not simply be reduced to their individual components. Instead, the principle of emergence, which is already expressed in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (e.g. VII 17, 1041 b 11-13; VIII 6, 1045 a 8-10), seems more viable here, assuming that the whole – that is the hybrid concept – represents more than the sum of its parts.

Such a view may also correct another claim often sustained in previous scholarship on the global conflagration, namely the assumption that the very aspect of a world-destroying fire is a mere takeover of Christian motifs by previously non-Christian cultures. Jens Peter Schjødt rightly calls this view into question by indicating that flames can be understood in terms of twofold semantics as life-giving and destroying, independent of cultural influences. The experience of the destructive force of fire could therefore have established the idea of cosmic fire catastrophes all over the world.

To sum up, it has become apparent from the individual case studies that the concept of a global conflagration was only partly handed down in a clear line, with minimal adaptations, as shown by Dominic Bärsch in his second contribution on Otto's *Chronica*. However, these paths of transmission cannot always be reconstructed in such obviously linear terms, as with the examples presented by Götz König and Jens Peter Schjødt. Therefore, it can mostly not be excluded that particular features originated from universal human experiences (in this case, negative and positive aspects of fire) and, thus, shaped conceptions of an end of the world by fire.

Bibliography

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