Infrastructure of Faith: Some Considerations on Correspondence in Late Antique Christianity

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The Christian correspondence of late antiquity is in many ways the subject of both ancient studies and theological-patristic research. So far, however, the focus has been primarily on the content and form of the texts, while little attention has been paid to the mobility of the texts, their circulation and migration under the spatial, temporal, cultural and social conditions of late antique writing.[1]

1 Consequently, the highly significant examination of the development and dissemination of Christian doctrinal content, ideas, and bodies of knowledge in the research landscape of late antiquity largely takes place within one-sided research parameters, which, if at all, take note of the concrete, i.e. real-life nature of late antique scriptural circulation only sporadically, implicitly, and marginally. The central importance of text migration for a deeper understanding of the religious, social, and political developments and constitution of Christian late antiquity thus remains largely ignored. Questions concerning the availability of texts in the context of different subject areas have so far mostly been touched upon and addressed only implicitly. For example, in the context of biographical studies, the whereabouts of a church scholar and his correspondence partners are placed in relation to one another; cf. e.g., maps of Jerome and his epistolary partners in Alfons Fürst, *Hieronymus. Askese und Wissenschaft in der Spätantike* (Freiburg: Herder, 2003); Stefan Rebenich, *Hieronymus und sein Kreis. Prosopographische und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1992). Dating issues of works play a role in reconstructing historical processes or chronologies of works. In the context of analysing theological conflicts, questions are also asked about the alliances of different bishops or social networks of influential laymen; cf. Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), esp. 11–41. Occasionally, some attention is also paid to the conditions and (often far-reaching and lasting) consequences of the dissemination of individual writings, such as the impact of Athanasius' *Vita Antonii* in the western part of the Roman Empire and its Latin translation on the development of the ascetic movement. Questions of translation (Greek/Latin/Hebrew/Aramaic) and cultural transfer play a role not only in the context of *Biblica*. Naturally, in the context of source studies, the use of pre-texts is addressed. Often, however, their availability is simply assumed without further consideration of the real-life conditions and prerequisites for it. Sometimes, once the messages about traffic and mobility of writings contained in ancient sources are explicitly perceived, only the metainformation associated with them is of interest. Studies on the networking and exchange of local groups in late antiquity also focus (mostly on the basis of archaeological finds such as

However, the spread and implementation of Christianity in the Mediterranean region is inconceivable without a communicative infrastructure of permanently circulating writings.[2] The supra-regional, even "globalized," Christian correspondence was rooted in the tension between the idea of the *unio ecclesiae* and the permanent striving for *oikumene* founded therein, which distinguished Christians from all other religious communities of antiquity, as well as the pronounced autonomy of highly divergent local churches, which had to be bridged and continuously mastered through the exchange of letters and correspondence.[3] Late antique Christianity ultimately constituted itself without geographical, political or national limitations as a discursive space whose boundaries are the boundaries of the flow of information of Christian messages and thus infinitely shiftable (*totus orbis*)[4]—(long-distance) communication is thus t h e constitutive infrastructure of the Christian faith.

While in the beginning (charismatic) individuals functioned as (mobile) nodes of the communicative networks, after the fading of Christian eschatology at the end of the 1st century, in the process of the differentiation of church structures, the correspondence between bishops also began, which aimed at maintaining the unity of the congregations and the creation of a common identity, while also preserving the personal power ambitions of individual bishops. The Christian self-understanding as a world-spanning community is only rendered concrete through the participation in this exchange of information. Contact with other communities was thus existential. In order to achieve the best possible positioning within the Christian community to consolidate their position of power—and thus also in asserting their positions, bishops (as authorized representatives of their congregations)[5] joined together in partly rivalling communication networks. These networks constituted themselves through

pottery shards) predominantly on economic contacts; cf. Christian Nitschke and Christian Rollinger, "Network Analysis is performed: Die Analyse sozialer Netzwerke in den Altertumswissenschaften. Rückschau und aktuelle Forschungen," in *Knoten und Kanten III. Soziale Netzwerkanalyse in Geschichts-und Politikforschung*, eds. Markus Gamper and Linda Reschke and Marten Düring (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015): 213–259, esp. 225–229.

2 Cf. Guy G. Stroumsa, "On the status of books in early Christianity," in *Being Christian in Late Antiquity: A Festschrift for Gillian Clark*, eds. Carol Harrison and Caroline Humfress and Isabella Sandwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 57–73, 61, who points out that the medial change from writing scrolls to codices, which Christian communities in particular took up briskly, facilitated the circulation of writings and ideas.

3 Cf. Eva Baumkamp, *Kommunikation in der Kirche des 3. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 1f.

4 On the great mobility and the global-geographical claim of the Christians Fürst, "Ende der Erde," esp. 273–275.

5 On the correspondence privilege of the bishop Baumkamp, *Kommunikation*, 7.

various elements of information exchange and they themselves defined parameters of membership by forming mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.[6]

After the Constantinian turn (at the latest), Christianity inscribed itself with complex interferences into the spatial as well as communicative fields of power of the *Imperium Romanum*. This not only signals significant change in the sacral topography of the Mediterranean region (partly caused by the emperor through church buildings), but also a modification of (remote) communicative processes.

On the one hand, the bishops now also competed for (spatial as well as discursive) proximity to and corresponding influence on imperial power (e.g., the increase in importance of the bishoprics of Constantinople or Milan). On the other hand, a centrally structured imperial communication had to interact with ecclesial networks whose reactive "elasticity" was enormous and hardly controllable, or at least difficult to control intentionally. Individual nodes can be destroyed or spatially displaced, but the network is flexible and highly regenerative. This had already been indicated in the times of persecution, when fugitive bishops, for example, were able to continue to operate as (epistolary) communication centres from changed locations. It was confirmed in the case of imperial interventions in internal church disputes: The exile of bishops in the course of the Arianism conflict led to contacts and the establishment of communication links between bishops and congregations that would hardly have come into contact without the bishops' change of location, and thus ultimately led to the expansion and consolidation of the communication network.[7]

Therefore, text migration functioned as an infrastructure of knowledge production and dissemination, of phenomena of intertextuality, of translation processes, and of cultural transfer (cultural hybridization). Text migration was an important tool for exercising and asserting influence/authority/rule in the context of (religious) conflict in that it can cause conflict, but it is also a means of alliance building (inclusion/exclusion), serves as a medium of argument and controversy, and is used in crisis management both for conflict escalation and for conflict containment and resolution. Furthermore, text migration creates an impetus for (and is a consequence of) social change, such as the rise of asceticism movements, which blur the boundaries between intimate/private and public/institutionalized communication.

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6 Cf. Baumkamp, *Kommunikation*, 5f; on the issue of inclusion and exclusion see Alois Hahn, "Theoretische Ansätze zu Inklusion und Exklusion," *Soziologisches Jahrbuch* 16 (2002/3): 67–88, esp. 70f. Already in pre-Constantinian Christianity, letters as a link between congregations functioned as a platform on which the dogmatic, theological, moral and church-political-practical questions of the time were made visible and also conflicts were fought out, Baumkamp, *Kommunikation*, 45f.

7 Cf. Julia Hillner, Jörg Ulrich, and Jakob Engberg (Hg.), *Clerical Exile in Late Antiquity* (Frankfurt: Lang, 2016;
Carmen Cvetković and Peter Gemeinhardt (Hg.), *Episcopal Networks in Late Antiquity: Connection and Communication Across Boundaries* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019).

The observation that the range, frequency, and density of the (indispensable) reciprocity of written communication determine the significance, options for influence, and ultimately the position of power of a bishop and the community he represents, but also of individuals, just as much as and sometimes even more significantly than the geographical location or size of the Christian community underscores the great importance of communication infrastructure for post-Constantinian Christianity: Aurelius of Carthage is the African metropolitan, but Augustine of Hippo is the communicative centre of North Africa! Such a comprehensive view can open up further horizons of knowledge about Christian late antiquity, which a study of textual semantics alone is not able to offer.

Which communication patterns and structures are formed simultaneously and/or successively? Regional, suprarational, long-distance networking? How are nodes, agglomerations, areas of thinning-out, breakoffs, etc. distributed? With which factors do these formations correlate—with geographical conditions, existing material infrastructure, political and economic centers, religious hotspots (episcopal seats, martyrs' tombs, etc.) or intellectual individuals? How do Christian (rather) horizontal communication networks generally inscribe themselves into the centrally and vertically structured communication of imperial power? What is the influence of political crises, military conflicts, environmental catastrophes? Which forms, condensations and abruptions of communication develop through religious conflicts, which role do the lifeworld conditions of space and time play in this? What is the relationship between different formations of scriptural circulation and the generation of (religious) power? Or what role do translations play in the formation of an overall Christian Mediterranean? etc.

The final goal, of course, should be the creation of a database or a digital (and therefore permanently expandable) "Atlas of Christian Scripture Traffic" of the 4th century.[8]

8 By inscribing the Christian writings as vectors in (chronologically ordered regional or overview) maps of the Mediterranean region (and linking them to commentary fields), the indispensable importance of communication for the Christian order of faith can be specified, since simultaneities and non-simultaneities of scriptural exchange, regional agglomerations, construction, dismantling and breaking down or shifting of communication boundaries in their location in the Mediterranean region can thus be grasped (at a glance). In addition, the digital form of publication offers the enormous advantage of the possibility of continuous updating, so that new research findings (during the project phase, but also later) can be continuously incorporated. Finally, it offers the possibility of multi-level presentations with which the user can interact. Patristic projects operating in the field of digital humanities, such as "Mapping Persecution and Martyrdom in Early Christianity" (Ohio Wesleyan University, Ohio, USA) or "Late Antique Clerical Exile and Social Network Analysis" (University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK) will serve as a guide and template. For an example of a digital representation of transport routes, times, and costs cf. http://orbis.stanford.edu/. In

In order to approach this distant goal, we have to deal with two (intermingled) levels of infrastructures, so to speak: On the one hand, scriptural communication itself provides a network-like communicative infrastructure for the process of Christianization in late antiquity. On the other hand, written communication, for its part, relies on the material-technical infrastructure of messengers, horses, and roads, but also paper, ink, scribes, or libraries etc.[9]

To be able to better assess the impact of the economic-communicative framework on dissemination, implementation, and establishment of religious content, and thus the complexity of the Christianization process in the *Imperium Romanum*, more attention should be paid to these material and real-life conditions of ancient scriptural communication.

What was the importance of stable and less stable communication channels between bishops in conflicts of faith? Did the availability and financing of better infrastructure—constant access to scribes, copyists, writing materials, messengers, but also archives and libraries—play a decisive role in schismatic situations? What influence on ecclesiastical-political developments do disruptions of the infrastructure have, for example through warlike conflicts that cut off transport routes or increase the dangers of losing texts on unsecured travel routes? How does the factor of time in ancient written correspondence affect religious conflicts? For example, what happens in a city with rival bishops when responses from fellow bishops asked for support or mediation do not (or cannot) arrive for weeks? What consequences does the fact that the Mediterranean Sea was simply not navigable under ancient sea travel conditions during the winter months (*mare clausum*) have for the rhythms of Christian communication in the ecclesiastical year?[10]

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the medium term, the creation of a digital atlas of Christian scriptural traffic will probably only be possible as a team effort.

9 On the general conditions of ancient writing and librarianship cf. Janine Desmulliez, Christine Hoet-van Cauwenberghe, and Jean-Christophe Jolivet (Hg.), *L´étude des correspondances dans le monde romain de l`Antiquité classique à l`Antiquité tardive: permanences et mutations* (Lille: Université Charles-de-Gaulle, 2010); Lionel Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Bastian van Elderen, "Early Christian libraries," in *The Bible as Book: The Manuscript Tradition*, eds. John Sharpe and Kimberly van Kampen (London: Oak Knoll Press, 1998): 45–59; Hans Carel Teitler, *Notarii and exceptores: An inquiry into role and significance of shorthand writers in the imperial and ecclesiastical bureaucracy of the Roman empire (from the early principate to c. 450 A.D.)* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1985).

10 On the general conditions of ancient travel and transport cf. Linda Ellis and Frank L. Kidner (Hg.), *Travel, Communication and Geography in Late Antiquity: Sacred and Profane*. (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004); Anne Kolb, *Transport und Nachrichtentransfer im Römischen Reich* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000); Denys Gorce, *Les voyages, l´hospitalite et le port des lettres das le monde chretien des IV. et V siècle* (Paris: Picard, 1925); Wolfgang Riepl, *Das Nachrichtenwesen des Altertums. Mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Römer* (Leipzig-Berlin: Teubner, 1913).

A specific focus on the communicative infrastructure will also help to shed light on the power-political origin and reference spaces of the preserved texts. Decisions of synods and councils, which are available today in the form of often rather brief *Canones*, emerge as the extremely concise result of highly complex communicative processes that built on an infrastructure of ecclesiastical correspondence created and established specifically for this purpose. The synods themselves were preceded not only by imperial letters of invitation but certainly also by coordination processes between episcopal sees based on (regular) messenger traffic. After the meetings, the results had to be communicated to the wider public, and the recipient of these letters as well as the person who *accepted them*—again, through written correspondence—was of crucial importance for the politics of faith.

When Ammianus Marcellinus, a late antique (pagan) historian, scoffs at the fact "that crowds of bishops were rushing back and forth across the country by state mail because of their so-called synods,"[11] he not only attests to the Constantinian privilege for bishops to use the *cursus publicus*, the imperial postal service actually reserved for high-ranking military and administrative officials, but also directs attention to the hybrid form of the Christian communication infrastructure.

Christian correspondence on the one hand uses—aside from the well-developed road and street network of the *Imperium Romanum*—existing transport systems such as those of the imperial postal service or of local and long-distance trade for the transport of messengers and/or written documents. On the other hand, however, it also generates connections that were organized and financed completely independently. These could be permanent and regularly used regionally as well as supra-regionally, so that they provided for a continuous flow of information (e.g. between episcopal sees, between monasteries, or between church leadership and imperial administration etc.). In addition, there were also large numbers of occasion-specific and strictly demand-driven "ad hoc transfers," which were then initiated, organized, equipped, and financed not only by Christian congregations or monasteries but also by individuals. Thus, the Christian communication networks exhibit a high degree of flexibility, efficiency, and a relatively favourable cost balance and thus largely correspond to the conditions of ancient private correspondence since hardly any usage-independent permanent transport structures had to be established and maintained.[12] At the same time, they differ fundamentally from

11 Ammianus Marcellinus, 21,16,18 in *Ammianus Marcellinus, Res gestae*, vol. 1, ed. Wolfgang Seyfarth (Stuttgart: Bibliotheca Teubneriana, 1978): 248–249.

12 The construction and maintenance of libraries and archives (rooms, writing materials, scribes, copyists, etc.) can be estimated as fixed costs, but transportation costs (messengers, pack animals, wagons, food, lodging, ship passages, etc.) were incurred only on occasion. Recruiting messengers from clerics of the bishop's seat or monks of a monastery saved costs – in analogy to trusted slaves of private persons – and increased confidentiality and chances of arrival for a document.

ancient private correspondence, especially in their institutionalized, i.e. supra-individual parts, in their actually "world-spanning" network structure, greater regularity, density of connections, and intended duration of existence.

Against this backdrop, the question of the participation options of authors/senders and readers/recipients of writings, who could be clerics or laymen, women or men, Christians or pagans/Jews, literate or illiterate, collectives or individuals,[13] seems particularly exciting for the analysis of the concrete manifestation of Christian text migration—in materiality, frequency, as well as network structure.

Thus, for example, the Christian ascetic movements that became established in the second half of the 4th century (as a consequence of dwindling expectations of the end times and opportunities for martyrdom) made ascetic individuals—often lay people and, among them even women, who at that time were already largely excluded from the clerical office structure—important nodes in the Christian scriptural traffic.

A particularly striking example of an individual who contributed significantly to the shaping of Christian doctrine in the Latin West by establishing and maintaining a personal long-distance communication network that was, nevertheless, linked to the institutional communication network of the official church is Saint Jerome, the biblical scholar and ascetic. His life and work recommend him as the starting point for an experimental analysis of late antique Christian correspondence.[14]

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13 On late antique correspondence cf. Sigrid Mratschek, *Der Briefwechsel des Paulinus von Nola. Kommunikation und soziale Kontakte zwischen christlichen Intellektuellen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2002); Frank Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo. Prosopographische, sozial-und ideologiegeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1993); Carsten Drecoll, *Nachrichten in der Römischen Kaiserzeit. Untersuchungen zu den Nachrichteninhalten in Briefen* (Freiburg: Carsten Drecoll Verlag, 2006).

14 His addressee network can thus, for example, be compiled from the letter corpus (which addressees also knew each other? Are there greetings to further persons?), which not only shows the accumulation of addressees (e.g. one addressee written to several times by one author; one addressee in several correspondences), their geographical distribution and their regional agglomeration, and social stratigraphy (e.g. status, gender, age, clergy/laity, Christian/pagan, world Christian/ascetic, etc.), but also insights into the chronology of the letters (incl. reconstruction of the answer), temporal condensations (in the context of certain church-political events, conflicts, heretical processes, etc.), or thematic emphases (which topics were discussed in broad public, etc.). More specifically, one of the main issues would be to collect, analyse, and process the information about textual movements contained in the correspondences, such as mentions of requested or co-sent writings, news about duplication processes, messengers (orality/writing), travel routes and transport routes, transport duration, lost writings, or even attempts to withdraw writings from circulation. Another goal is to reconstruct (taking into account the methodological problems involved) the writings available to the authors, aiming at an approximate reconstruction of (private) libraries and archives as (immobile and at the same time dynamic) nodes of the communicative infrastructure.

Jerome was (at least in the first 40 years of his life) himself a great traveller (Stridon/Pannonia – Rome – Trier – Aquileia – Antioch – Constantinople – Rome – Cyprus – Jerusalem – Egypt – Bethlehem), who had known large parts of the Mediterranean region himself. As an (officially) insignificant priest (ordained by a schismatic bishop), without a congregation, he, as an ascetic teacher and theologian, made the rather peripheral village of Bethlehem next to Jerusalem a theological-exegetical centre, which radiated into the entire Mediterranean region. His correspondence partners were located around the Mediterranean Sea (Italy, Gaul, Spain, North Africa, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Constantinople, Cyprus). He evolved into a central hub in Christian scriptural traffic without being a bishop and without being in a political or economic centre and thus represents a phenomenon of the Christian spatial order of the 4th century. He was himself a pilgrim and built a pilgrim hospice in Bethlehem with his *patrona* Paula. He was not only involved in controversies about pilgrimage and the question of the "Holy Land," but also contributed through his writings to the theological foundation of Christian pilgrimage. Jerome was also an (actively involved) contemporary witness of the beginnings of a hegemony (established via communicative processes of correspondence!) of the Roman *cathedra Petri*, which also has a lasting impact on the communicative infrastructure. He was proficient in Latin and Greek (as well as Hebrew and probably some Aramaic) and acted as an interpreter, translator, and cultural mediator (on a church-political agenda) between the eastern and western Mediterranean lands. Jerome was involved in numerous inner-church disputes (Arianism dispute, Antiochian schism, heresy of Iovinian, dispute about Origen, Pelaganian dispute), so that his writing is able to give deep insights into the spatial-discursive conditions of these conflict scenarios. Jerome's writings, which are extensive enough to provide insights into all these aspects of discursive shaping of the Christian Mediterranean, but also manageable enough to develop, test, and establish methodological parameters, contain a great deal of meta-information on travel and correspondence in the late antique Mediterranean area. His (extensively preserved) writings are quite well datable (by ancient standards).

Above all, he was fully aware of the need for a viable distribution infrastructure for his writings and worked toward this purposefully: He intensively cultivated contact with clerics and lay people who were to pay for and distribute copies of his works.[15] Not only did he proclaim that his complete œuvre is available for copying in his Bethlehemite monastic library (exorbitant in scope and quality!), but he also

15 For example, Hieronymus, ep. 71,5,1 in *Hieronymus, Epistulae*, vol. 2, ed. Isidorus Hilberg (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 1996, = CSEL 55), 5; Hieronymus, ep. 75,4,1 in *Hieronymus, Epistulae*, vol. 2, 33; Hieronymus, *Epistulae inter epistulas Augustini* 27*, Sanctis Aureli Augustini opera II,6, Epistulae ex duobus codicibus nuper in lucem prolatae recensit J. (Vienna: Johannes Divjak, 1981, = CSEL 88): 132–133.

suggested the libraries of Roman friends as alternative sources. He simply recommended his catalogue of works in *De viris illustribus* as an order catalogue.[16]

His correspondence with bishops, clerics, and monasteries, but also with male and female laymen (ascetics), which (demonstrably)[17] reached Italy, Gaul, Spain, North Africa, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Constantinople, and Cyprus, ensured a widespread and lasting distribution of his writings, and thus laid the foundation for sufficient manuscripts to survive the centuries.

The fact that Jerome—an insignificant monk on the Bethlehemite periphery—in subsequent centuries, in association with the bishops Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory, advanced to become a Doctor of the Church in the West as well as an authority on doctrine and faith and was formally canonized by Pope Boniface VIII on September 20, 1295, is, in a way, also the result of his lifelong efforts to provide an adequate communication infrastructure.

16 Hieronymus, ep. 47,3,1-2 in *Hieronymus, Epistulae*, vol. 1, ed. Isidorus Hilberg (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 1996, = CSEL 55): 346.

17 Of course, our knowledge of his correspondence partners is sketchy and the actual distribution quantities of his works remain extremely vague for us.