*Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies 49 (1) 22–28*

# Late Antiquity, post-modernity, and Islam: the 1970s as a point of departure and retrospection

Olof Heilo
*The Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul / Lund University*
*olof.heilo@hist.lu.se*

*The 1970s saw the rise of two unrelated and yet affine historical concepts: Late Antiquity (Brown 1971) and Post-Modernism (Lyotard 1979). It is almost as if the breakdown of Antiquity in the way it had been traditionally understood, clearly delineated from the Middle Ages and the Byzantine Empire, heralded the dissolution of the Modern Western self-understanding and everything that went with it. For Byzantine studies, it came with a flora of textual rediscoveries; but the gate that had opened onto the spiritual meadows of Late Antiquity could also be used to approach and contextualize Islam in a new way.*

**Keywords:** Late Antiquity; post-modernity; Islam; Byzantium; antiquity; modernity; post-colonialism; 1970s

The 'post-modern condition' that Jean-François Lyotard discussed in his famous essay of that name in 1979 is often associated with the imagery of fragments and ruins. With Derrida, every discourse is a *bricolage*, the deployment of concepts from ruined heritage.[1] 'At the end of my painful reconstruction, I had before me a kind of lesser library, a symbol of the greater, vanished one: a library made up of fragments, quotations, unfinished sentences, amputated stumps of books', the monk Adso ponders at the end of Umberto Eco's post-modern *credo*, *The Name of the Rose* (1980), a novel that pays homage to Wittgenstein as the great philosopher of insufficiency.[2]

The post-modern landscape is ruinous, but in relation to what? In its most tangible sense, this relates to Europe before the twentieth-century catastrophes, but in a

1 J. Derrida, *L'écriture et la difference* (Paris 1967) 417–22.
2 U. Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, tr. W. Weaver (New York 2014) 537.


DOI: 10.1017/byz.2024.18

conceptual sense to how some parts of Europe had believed themselves to be well beyond them. The powers that emerged victorious out of the world wars could still claim that modernity had meant progress in terms of economic and technological advancement, even if it may have sounded increasingly hollow in the shadow of nuclear armament. Morally and politically, however, at least two of them, Britain and France, already began to lose the global high ground in the post-war decades, leaving them in doubt about their superiority.

For large parts of the world, and indeed for large parts of Europe itself, the experience of modernity had been considerably more ambiguous. The Viennese thinkers that many Anglo-American postmodernists became fond of citing in the 1970s had been living in the ruins of a collapsing imperial modernity more than fifty years before.[3] In his novel *A Mind at Peace*, published in 1949 but set ten years earlier, the Turkish author Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar lets his protagonist ponder the decaying urban fabric of Ottoman Istanbul at the same time as the radio announces the German attack on Poland: a subtle dig at the notion that the cure for the alleged sickness of his country would be found in Europe.[4]

In short, the ruins were already there for everyone to behold – the colonial powers Britain and France were simply the stragglers, who refused to admit it until the wave of decolonization swept over the world in the 1950s and 1960s. The 1970s saw disillusionment spread to the United States: the oil crisis, the withdrawal from Vietnam, and eventually the Iranian revolution all seemed to spell the rapid end of the self-proclaimed Western order, and in 1977 Edward Said put a horrendous bill on its table with his postcolonial manifesto *Orientalism*. This is not to say that radical modernity in its Russian or Chinese incarnation fared better: what was breaking down was not the modern way of life in itself, but the illusion of an underlying grand-scale order or logic.[5] Perhaps we had never been modern.[6] Or perhaps modernity had actually been about impermanence, dissonance, and fragmentation all along, and showed no regard for fixed concepts of culture or civilization.[7]

In this context, it should be noted that the 1970s is also the decade when the term Late Antiquity enters scholarly discourse. Unlike Said and Lyotard, Peter Brown did

3 A. Janik and S. Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York 1973) 255–62.

4 Cf. A. Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (Cambridge 1983) 346. Hourani's explanation for concluding his history of Arabic liberalism precisely in 1939 deserves to be quoted in this context: 'The spectacle of Europe tearing herself in pieces, and the sudden collapse of France, aroused doubts about both the strength and the virtues; perhaps Europe did not possess the 'secret' of stable happiness.'

5 In the words that Paddy Chayefsky put in the words of his neo-liberal tycoon in the 1976 movie *Network*: 'What do you think the Russians talk about in their councils of state? Karl Marx? They get out their linear programming charts, statistical decision theories, minimax solutions, and compute the price-cost probabilities of their transactions and investments, just like we do. We no longer live in a world of nations and ideologies, Mr. Beale.'

6 B. Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: Essai d'anthropologie symétrique* (Paris 1991).

7 M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: the experience of modernity* (New York 1982).

https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2024.18 Published online by Cambridge University Press

not set out to make a statement about his own age when he wrote *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971), but the stated purpose of the book to take the reader into a world 'caught between the regretful contemplation of ancient ruins and the excited acclamation of new growth'[8] chimes with the way Marshall Berman described a decade where people could no longer 'afford to annihilate the past and present in order to create a new world *ex nihilo*; they had to learn to come to terms with the world they had, and work from there'.[9] Brown himself credits Henri-Irénée Marrou (1904–1977) with first using the term *antiquitité tardive* and underlines how Marrou's interpretations of the age of St Augustine mirrored the Christian humanist's own convictions and experiences of having lived through the mental and physical shock of the Second World War.[10] This is not to imply that 'Late Antiquity' is a mere projection of the post-modern mind, or that the fifth century carries a striking resemblance to the twentieth.[11] Rather, the simultaneous appearance of Late Antiquity and post-modernity appears a logical consequence of how two interlocked readings of modernity and antiquity as closed and impenetrable paradigms were no longer capable of supporting and sustaining each other.[12]

Post-colonial studies often problematize modern constructions of Antiquity on the basis of how they narrate its origins: for instance, how the classical or Graeco-Roman Mediterranean has been excised from of its larger Near Eastern context under the auspices of whiteness.[13] Martin Bernal was correct at least in highlighting *how* late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century scholarship on Ancient Greece paralleled the emerging Orientalist discourse and the nascent racial and colonial theories that would underpin it.[14] But how does not equal *why*: if the Modern or Western construction of Antiquity is Orientalist simply because it is Modern or Western, nothing has been explained at all, except a certain positional relativity in time and space. Of more interest is the question how much a desire to be at once modern and Western would have necessitated the construction of a classical Antiquity that was independent and autochthonous.[15] If Graeco-Roman antiquity had been inherently different from and

8 P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150–750* (London 1971) 7.

9 Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 332.

10 P. Brown, *Journeys of the Mind: a life in history* (Princeton 2023) 180–2, 269–73.

11 In his *Postille a Il Nome della Rosa* (1983) Eco reflects upon the term post-modernity and suggests that the phenomenon as such is timeless: *The Name of the Rose,* 569–73. Interesting to mention in this context is Barbara Tuchman's classic *A Distant Mirror: the calamitous 14th Century* (New York 1978), which tries to draw a parallel from the twentieth century, not with Late Antiquity, but with the late Middle Ages, indeed the very century Eco uses as a setting for his novel.

12 It is interesting to note how Peter Brown highlights his encounter with Jacques Berque and the history of Roman Christian North Africa, right during the Algerian war of independence, as a milestone in his scholarship on what would become Late Antiquity: Brown, *Journeys of the Mind*, 232–7.

13 E. Adler, *Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond* (Ann Arbor 2016) 113–72.

14 W. van Binsbergen (ed.) *Black Athena Comes of Age: towards a constructive re-assessment* (Berlin 2011), 11–64.

15 A. Koschorke, *Hegel und wir* (Frankfurt 2016), 47–54, 122–5, 146–56, 164–7, 207–14.

https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2024.18 Published online by Cambridge University Press

superior to its wider historical and geographical context, nineteenth-century Europeans had found a secret refuge from the confusing realities of the growing globalization which it had unleashed upon itself, an esoteric mission which the heartless reason of an emerging secularism seemed to deny it. Like impossible bottles, which display ship models larger than the opening they would have to fit through, Antiquity and Modernity served as sealed, transparent containers for historical processes that appeared inexplicably large and created out of nothing (cf. fig. 1).

Of course, this illusion presumed that the bottles were closed not only at the bottom, but also at the neck. An ancient period with an unclear ending somewhere in the Middle East and the Middle Ages would be as embarrassing to the classicist's model of history as one with multiple origins in Egypt, Syria, Anatolia, or Mesopotamia. Classicism, but also Orientalism in the sense that Said and later post-colonial theorists have discussed, could only come into being if the intersectionality of the Byzantine Empire was ignored.[16] It was similarly vital to exclude its global entanglements from an exclusively Western European mission to the world.[17] Detached from the messy realities of a Near Eastern medieval empire, continuity between classical Antiquity and the modern West became a hermetic phenomenon in the truest sense of the word – from one airtight bottle to the other.[18]

The consequences can be very clearly observed in the history of religions. The Graeco-Roman paradigm cannot ignore Judaism and Christianity: at least part of their history either takes place inside the bottle or at an observable distance, tentatively redeemable by it.[19] Islam, which appear after it was sealed, does not: hence it must appear as a product of the Orient itself, creative or destructive, frightening or enticing, admirable or despicable, but essentially different.[20]

16 I have recently discussed this in O. Heilo, 'The Barbarians will always stay: Rose Macaulay and the futility of Empire", in M. Kulhánková and P. Marciniak (eds), *Byzantium in the Popular Imagination: the Modern Reception of the Byzantine Empire* (London 2023) 225–38, where Barbarianism and Byzantinism, respectively, appear as the 'hidden' or suppressed links between the otherwise static paradigms Classicism and Orientalism. Whereas there are obvious elements of Orientalism in the Modern reception of Byzantium, Orientalism and Byzantinism should not be confused: as any reader of Frank Herbert's *Dune* can detect, their functions as narrative tropes are very different.

17 In F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (Berlin 1848) 408–21 the Byzantine Empire appears as a dead end, briefly concluding the chapter on the Roman world. It is immediately followed by the chapter on the Germanic world, 'the spirit of the new age' which leads up to Hegel's own time. Cf. M. Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Paris 1937), 130, where the Germanic invaders gradually become the bearers of the ancient heritage through being civilized by the old Roman Mediterranean – a typically French way of looking at it.

18 As I have previously argued with reference to Burckhardt, this may reflect a Protestant mindset: O. Heilo, 'Between decline and renascence: the Late Antiquity of Jacob Burckhardt', in M. Malm and S. Schottenius Cullhed (eds), *Reading Late Antiquity* (Heidelberg 2018) 73–82.

19 B. Schäbler, *Moderne Muslime: Ernest Renan und die Geschichte der ersten Islamdebatte 1883* (Leiden 2016), 29–50 emphasizes how Renan situated the childhood of Jesus in the 'Hellenic landscape' of Galilee but stressed the relationship of Muhammad and the entire Islamic tradition with the desert.

20 This becomes most evident in Renan's famous debate with Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani in 1883, at which his lack of understanding and appreciation of the Late Antique and Byzantine milieu made him unable to

https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2024.18 Published online by Cambridge University Press

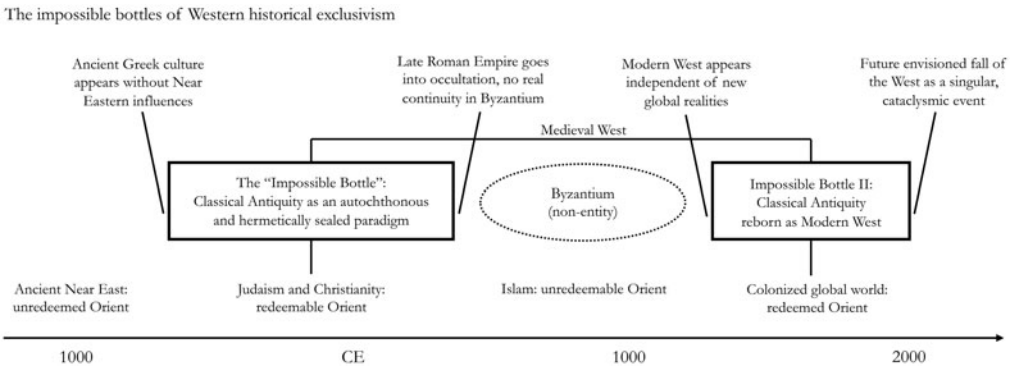


Fig. 1. The 'impossible bottles': by sealing off Classical Antiquity at the beginning and the end, it becomes possible to narrate the story of the Modern West as a similarly airtight phenomenon – but the absence of Byzantium leaves no historical interface for contextualizing the rise of Islam. The only connection between the two bottles consists in a transfer of a secret knowledge or esoteric wisdom that appears to stand outside of history itself. Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971) might be called the first concerted effort to uncork the first (ancient) bottle, but also needs to be read against the uncorking of the second (modern) one. Drawing by the author.

Here, the term Late Antiquity makes a palpable difference. Revisionist scholarship on Islam has its breakthrough in the late 1970s, and it is worth noting how Patricia Crone questions traditional Islamic historiography on the grounds that it contains no traces of 'the colorful world described by historians of late antiquity'.[21] If there had been no closed antiquity in the sense that some Europeans imagined, in the same sense as there had been no closed modernity, and Islam appears in a world where the Byzantine and Sasanian empires hold sway, 'caught between the regretful contemplation of ancient ruins and the excited acclamation of new growth', then Christianity and Islam can both be understood in terms of *bricolage*. The Princeton series in *Studies of Late Antiquity and Early Islam* that began to appear in 1981 has come to constitute the core in a fertile field of research that with time has mitigated the wildest revisionism but still firmly entrenched Islam in a context where it becomes more than a matter of revelation, conviction, and violence.

The need to render fragile all things solid (*fragiliser*), is how Peter Brown himself describes the impact of Michel Foucault, whose lectures he attended at Berkeley in

historically contextualize the Graeco-Arabic translation movement. It might be noted that some of the most influential 'Greek' authors whose works were translated into Arabic in the 9th century had lived closer in time and space to the emperors in Constantinople and the first caliphs in Damascus than they had to Pericles or Alexander the Great.

21 P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses: the evolution of the Islamic polity* (Cambridge 1980) 11–12. The choice of words is interesting: to Gibbon, Symeon the Stylite and Theodoret exemplified how the ancient world had fallen into a state of servility and extravagance since the days of Cato and Cicero. Under the auspices of Late Antiquity, it becomes, instead, 'colourful'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2024.18 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1980.[22] But vulnerability entails other challenges. A few years ago, in a lecture in Uppsala, one of the main initiators and editors of the Princeton series, Averil Cameron, warned that Islamic studies have now appropriated the term Late Antiquity to the point where Byzantium becomes relegated to the margins of a field which its scholars had fought dearly against the classicists to claim.[23] It is a valid concern for what is still, by and large, an 'excluded middle' in the minds of the general public; but it is also interesting in consideration of the contested role that Islam holds within the post-modern paradigm. The 1970s was a major turning-point in the history of the modern Middle East, when Islamic movements began to fill the power vacuum of the crumbling socialist and nationalist endeavors of modernity; and Foucault has often be criticized for his writings from revolutionary Iran, in which he gravely misjudged the intentions of Khomeini.[24] To many of its critics ever since, the post-modern shift has become associated with the idea of freedom from the confines of one world order merely at the cost of vulnerability and potential submission to another.[25] Would it be logical to conclude that the world of Late Antiquity is becoming conquered by Islam, once again, as a consequence of post-modern relativism?

Part of this is related to another trend that becomes apparent in the 1970s: the rise of (post-colonial) ethnic identity culture and memory as an alternative to globalized modernity.[26] Whereas it can both deepen and diversify our understanding of the past by highlighting forgotten or suppressed histories, a too strong emphasis on their untouchability runs the risk of replacing two impossible bottles with an entire museum of them, inherently fragile in their attempts to tell airtight histories.[27] I have previously argued that this is where Byzantine history may offer a certain remedy, because the concept constantly challenges our efforts to delimit it.[28] Rather than allowing it to get pushed to the margins by stronger, identity-based narratives, its scholars should become more assertive in securing its place in a global perspective, even on the

22 Brown, *Journeys of the Mind*, 578.

23 A. Cameron, 'Byzantium now – contested territory or excluded middle?", *Scandinavian Journal of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 5 (2019) 91–111 (103–4).

24 M. Leezenberg, 'Power and political spirituality: Michel Foucault on the Islamic Revolution in Iran' in J. Bernauer and J. Carrette (eds), *Michel Foucault and Theology* (Abingdon 2004) 99–114. Peter Brown's deeper delving into the history Islam also took place at the backdrop of the Iranian revolution: Brown, *Journeys of the Mind*, 520–6. Less known at the time despite the repercussions it would have was the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by a self-proclaimed Mahdi, with far-reaching consequences for the rise of global Islamism: see Y. Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: the forgotten uprising in Islam's holiest shrine and the birth of Al Qaeda* (New York 2007).

25 B. Tibi, 'Culture and knowledge: the politics of Islamization of knowledge as a postmodern project? The fundamentalist claim to de-Westernization", *Theory, Culture, and Society* 12.1 (1995) 1–24.

26 Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 333.

27 Cf. S. N. Eisenstadt (ed.), 'Multiple Modernities', *Daedalus* 129.1 (2000), 1–29, esp. 20–2.

28 O. Heilo, 'Beyond Orientalism: Byzantium and the historical contextualisation of Islam in M. Grünbart, *Verflechtungen zwischen Byzanz und dem Orient: Beiträge aus der Sektion Byzantinistik" im Rahmen des 32. Deutschen Orientalistentages in Münster (23.-27. September 2013)* (Münster 2019) 47–54, esp. 48–9, 53.

https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2024.18 Published online by Cambridge University Press

impossible premises of speaking for something that Greeks, Turks, icon painters, mosque architects, Viking re-enactors, self-proclaimed defenders of the Western order, and Vladimir Putin may all seem to claim for themselves.

Another responsibility lies on the scholars of Islam to remain sensitive to how their subject stands in a constant dialectic with the non-Muslim world. Here, Late Antiquity is one concept that can offer more than a self-constituting framework for approaching the religious realities – but it presumes, of course, that it is acknowledged as something beyond its decorative setting. The *bricolage* is not just a heap of stones: the *spolia* keep telling their own stories, over and over again.[29]

*Olof Heilo is the director of the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul. He holds a PhD in Byzantine studies from the University of Vienna and has previously taught history at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies in Lund. His academic work focuses on history narration and reception, especially with regard to empires and monotheistic religion.*

29 Or, to finish where we started: 'Often from a word or a surviving image I could recognize what the work had been. When I found, in time, other copies of those books, I studied them with love, as if destiny had left me this bequest, as if having identified the destroyed copy were a clear sign from heaven that said to me: Tolle et lege." Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 537.

https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2024.18 Published online by Cambridge University Press