What did transnationalism look like in late antiquity?

A framework for comparison

Transnationalism is a recent field of study which analyses large scale, complex movements of people and ideas. This poses the question: can a methodology which seems so suited to modernity can be applied to the past? This also leads to another question: what framework is needed to define transnationalism in a particular time and place when terms used today and their interrelationships cannot be applied? To answer these questions, we must see whether a valid comparison can be made using concepts that were meaningful in that particular time and place. This blogpost focuses on northern Italy and the timeframe is the 4th century. This is the beginning of the period known as late antiquity, a time of transition from Greco-Roman antiquity to the Middle Ages in Europe and adjacent regions.

At this time, though borders were at times porous, the Roman empire was bounded geographically and as a single polity. People within the empire, and even those outside, had valued Roman citizenship since the time of the republic. Now that such citizenship was available to all, its value had diminished, and by the 4th century, its associated benefits had all but evaporated. Roman culture still had a cachet among the upper strata of society and well into the 5th century there was nothing incongruous in a good Christian, even a bishop, valuing Greco-Roman literature and being familiar with the gods of the pagan pantheon. The unparalleled power of Rome was also evinced by the similar styles of its culture that were adopted in all parts of the empire by such disparate peoples. From the spoken language to the architecture of the urban landscape, from styles of dress to systems of agronomics, the hallmarks of Roman culture were ubiquitous. However, the adoption of an empire's material culture does not necessarily mean the acceptance of its identity or its hegemony.[1] In general, people identified with their province or region, as well as having more precise loyalties to family and tribe. "Belonging to Rome, remaining Greek" is how Kremydi-Sicilianou described the attitude of people in Macedonia under the hegemony of Rome; a person might have been a Roman citizen, but their ethnicity would be Greek, and they would similarly identify as Greek.[2] Migrants from one province of Rome to another maintained such identities and were often reminded of them. Racial and religious distinctions were evident, as were animosities towards and between different groups.[3] In this manner, one such migrant can be analysed, subject to the vicissitudes of living far from his native land, but also an agent of change to a new identity that transcended all boundaries – ethnic, cultural, and political.

Zeno of Verona

Picture the scene: it's a Sunday in Verona and the year is 363. As a city of about 25,000 inhabitants Verona's mixed racial profile reflects its strategic position; it lies at the junction of

[1] (Whittaker 2009, 199)

[2] (Kremydi-Sicilianou 2005). Whittaker makes the point that at the Roman frontiers, ethnicities could overlap. In the province of Mauretania, at the south-west limit of the empire, ethnic boundaries were not always contiguous with the frontier, with some people of the same identity inside and others outside the empire.

[3] (Isaac 2004; Drake 2011)

major north-south and east-west roads in northern Italy. Merchants, farmers, soldiers, and others know these roads and know Verona as a garrison and trading centre. Zeno, bishop of the diocese, gives his weekly sermon to a congregation, including many newly converted Christians. Today, in the month of January, he celebrates the feast of a martyr. The Church at this time is in an expansionary phase. Under the emperor Constantine in 413, the Edict of Milan recognised the Christian faith as a valid belief system. By 380, the Edict of Thessalonica effectively made Christianity the state religion, to the exclusion of all others. In the intervening years, the official toleration was metastable, subject to outbreaks of violence and persecution of Christians by pagans, and *vice versa*. The Roman empire was ruled as two separate territories, east and west, and many functions were devolved to regional and local level. Nevertheless, a single polity prevailed: a Roman citizen could be from Egypt or Britain, from Spain or Greece, and would enjoy the same rights as his fellow citizens.[4] The Church was institutionalising, using many of the structures of the state, including the dioceses and archdioceses. In the still fraught period between recognition as **a** religion to recognition as **the** religion, the Church made use of the preceding years of repression. It recruited role models from the many Christians killed for their faith under various bouts of imperial persecution, which even continued into the 4th century. There were several such martyrs in the Verona area including Firmus and Rusticus from nearby Bergamo - the church of San Fermo still stands by the river Adige in Verona today. But back to January 363, Zeno's choice of sermon is completely unknown to the congregation. It recalls the tale of Arcadius, a martyr from a remote corner of the empire in north Africa. Zeno describes in gory detail the trial of Arcadius and his steadfast refusal to renounce his faith as he was slowly dismembered.[5] But this begs the question, why did Zeno pick Arcadius as his subject?

In the following century, after the Vandal invasion of north Africa, many Christians and their clergy fled northwards to Italy. They took with them their memories of and devotion to local martyrs. These often took root as cults in the new domicile,[6] but apart from exceptions like Cyprian of Carthage, there is no evidence of such cults in Italy before the 5th century. Specifically, there is no evidence of an organised cult for Arcadius.[7] Yet the death of Arcadius, as conveyed in a highly dramatic and colourful register, suited the purpose of Zeno - a migrant himself - for an inspiring sermon about his fellow countryman. It was an exemplary tale of devotion, sacrifice, and steadfast faith. Since the 3rd century, citizenship had been granted to all its free inhabitants, not just those born in Rome or even Italy. By the time of Zeno, virtually every free person was a Roman - even freed slaves could claim citizenship. There were pathways to citizenship even for those from outside the empire. Members of Germanic and other tribes could cross the frontier and if they joined the auxiliaries or the regular army, they could claim to be Romans. However, the cachet of being a Roman had been devalued. The right to vote had all but vanished, as had tax exemptions

[4] The *Constitutio Antoniana* of 212 ordained that all those living in the empire were entitled to the rights and obligations of Roman citizenship. (Cameron 1993, 9)

[5] (Zeno and Banterle 2008, I, 19). The rhetoric of the sermon is very expressive and somewhat contrived. It belongs to a genre called *passiones martyrum*. (Barelli 1980) Zeno's account of the martyrdom of Arcadius is more rhetorical and bloodthirsty than his usual style. It may be his own template for hagiography or it could be taken from an earlier version of the martyr's *passio*. In either case, it served his stated purpose of commemorating the deeds of Arcadius, and of inspiring people towards the reward of heaven. See (Dekkers and Gaar 1995); (Ruinart 1869, 466); (Saxer 1994, 56)

[6] (Conant 2010)

[7] (Beltrán Torreira 2010)

for those in the provinces. Society was very stratified, not just between free and slave, but also within the free citizenship. There were differences between regions and, given the ethnic mix throughout the empire, differences within regions. In the 3rd and 4th centuries, local variations became more prominent and different styles of material culture were more visible.[8] These were not nations in the modern sense, but races originating from different parts of the empire – and beyond – and living and working together. In two sermons to the newly baptised, Zeno noted their multiracial composition:

> Why are you standing there, you who are of different origin, different in age, sex, and class? Hurry to the font, the sweet womb of the ever-virgin mother!
>
> The unbroken fasts in which you atoned in holy devotion, the sweet vigils of the night, brightly lit by its own sub, the life-giving font of foaming liquid in which you bathed in the hope of everlasting life, all these are now over for you, as you, different in age, different in race, now brothers, now born together, have now risen.[9]

In another sermon, delivered to the general congregation, Zeno made explicit the universal nature of the Church and its openness to all races:

> It was not for no reason that God called it the great city: for in the future the peoples of all nations should believe in Christ and the whole world should become one city for God.[10]

He went on to say that those who convert to Christianity will not worship idols; will not make blood sacrifices; or attempt divination in the entrails of animals or in the flight of birds.[11] Zeno underscored the Catholic or universal nature of the Church and likened it to a great cosmopolitan city where people of all nations live together in peace and in common worship of Christ. This echoes the New Jerusalem of the Bible and prefigures Augustine's City of God.[12] The idea that Christian salvation was open to all was a doctrine debated since the 2nd century.

Arguably, in another manner, Zeno's commemoration of Arcadius on 12th January 363 drew attention to the day itself as part of the sanctorale. The *sanctorale* is a part of the Church calendar which celebrates the feast days of martyrs and saints. It runs concurrently with the *temporale*, which comprises the main seasons of Easter and Advent. By the time of Zeno's episcopate in Verona, the Church calendar was being populated with the feast days of cult figures from all parts of Christendom. Zeno's choice of Arcadius therefore made it clear that the *sanctorale* was not parochial nor diocesan, but universal and Catholic. It was independent of boundaries within and beyond the empire.

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[8] (Cameron 1993, 9), (Roberts 2016, 151 - 152)

[9] From sermons (I, 55) and (I, 24), delivered to catechumens respectively before and after baptism. (Zeno and Banterle 2008, I, 55), (Zeno and Banterle 2008, I, 24.1)

[10] (Zeno and Banterle 2008, I, 34.9)

[11] (Stepanich 1948, 9)

[12] Ezekiel, Revelation 3:12, 21:2

In a sermon to the newly baptised adults and adolescents, Zeno gave the first Christian explanation of the zodiac. Zeno acknowledged that people were interested in their horoscopes and he related to them his own interpretation of the twelve symbols of astrology.[13] As far as possible, he substituted familiar Christian icons for the traditional signs of the horoscope. Thus, Aries the ram became the lamb of God and Virgo was replaced by the Virgin Mary through a process of scriptural indemnification. Zeno reminded his newly baptised congregation they had all been reborn on the same day, in the same place. As Christians, they now shared a new identity, transcending boundaries of class, race, ethnic origin, and free from the arbitrary fate as set by astral symbols.

Conclusion

In the various examples presented in this blog post, we see how Zeno's sermons made explicit the diversity of peoples within the Roman empire. He referred to different races, sexes, ages, and classes and said that all were welcome within the Church. He exploited his own all-too-visible "otherness", his lived experience as a migrant, and the practices of his native Caesarea in Mauretania as part of his cultural baggage. In his sermon on the zodiac, Zeno showed how the sacrament of baptism gave converts a reset, in the form of a rebirth that was always auspicious, whatever their original biological birth sign.[14] Christians could celebrate a new birthday rather than worrying about the vagaries of the signs of the zodiac.[15]

Zeno's sermons show us how diversity could be used and how "otherness" transcended in an era which saw a rebalancing of spiritual and temporal power. With the institution and the liturgy of the Church as a framework, a new inclusivity was prefigured and was spoken of as something worth striving for, as one of the benefits of the Christian faith. However, this note of solidarity rang hollow and was not to last, even within the tenure of Zeno in Verona. As the new monotheism monopolized belief, the Church became increasingly exclusionary, producing the "other" in all those who did not adhere to its rigid doctrines. Even in the age of the superstate, the multinational, and mass migration, national identity still resonates, and features at flashpoints of violent conflict around the world. As this blogpost has shown,

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[13] (Zeno and Banterle 2008, I, 38) This is the sermon in which the bishop recruited the state to his purpose of dismissing any arcane genethlialogical practices. Rather than condemn soothsaying and fortune-telling, he hinted that there would soon be a law against such activities. In fact, there were already prohibitions, so perhaps Zeno was signalling even tougher measures.

[14] In the early Church, confirmation took place at Easter and immediately followed baptism, indeed was an integral part of the first sacrament. Easter is a moveable feast and can occur on a range of possible dates. All, however, are within the zodiacal periods of Pisces and Aries, both of which are benign signs under the Christian dispensation, according to Zeno. They had also been auspicious signs since the earliest known records of astrology in Chaldean times; Aries was associated with rebirth, with the vernal equinox, and with wealth through the production of wool, while Pisces was also connected to the notion of abundance. (Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 130-132, 147-148)

[15] This notion depended on birthday and baptism being largely independent of each other, a circumstance which did not survive beyond the centuries of conversion in Europe. A similar concept, the name-day (*onomastico* in Italy, *fête du prénom* in France, *navnedag* in Denmark, *именни дни* in Bulgaria, *névnap* in Hungary, etc), in still a feature of life in many countries to this day.

ethnicity and religion are ambiguous and not necessarily etic, they cannot be generalised or historicised across time and space. Rather than use predefined terms or textbook nomenclature, we can expand upon and analyse narratives of identity from the categories and contexts used by agents such as Zeno. We must also allow for cases in which identity is not a category which yields much left for analysis.

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Figure 1 Verona on the river Adige

Figure 2 Verona, the Roman stone bridge

Figure 3 Verona, the arena

Figure 4 Verona, basilica of St Zeno

Figure 5 Zeno, bishop and angler

Figure 6 Tomb of St Zeno, in crypt of basilica