The Transformation of the Roman World, AD 284–476

Course Director: Dr J Weisweiler

Aims and objectives

1. To introduce students to the social, economic and cultural history of the Roman Empire and surrounding regions from the late third to the late fifth century AD and to the literature and art produced in this period.

2. To explore in depth the nature of government in the Late Roman state, the cultural self-understandings of its ruling élites and the structure of the Late Roman economy.

3. To trace the ways in which Christianity reshaped conceptions of the body and permissible sexual conduct in the late-antique Mediterranean and Near East. To analyse the relationship between state power and religious forms of authority in the Roman Empire, and to trace the radically different ways in which religious difference was managed in Sasanian Iran.

4. To consider the impact of the dissolution of the Roman Empire on the distribution of power between élites and peasants in different regions of the Mediterranean World and western Europe. To think about the development of new forms of ethnic self-understanding in post-Roman states.

5. To explore the utility for the study of ancient history of modern theoretical strategies from other disciplines. To introduce undergraduates to a wide range of (ancient and modern) historical approaches and literary traditions.

6. To encourage a wide variety of critical responses to the sources; to seek to integrate a wide range of different source material, in particular, studies of specific authors and their surviving works with art historical and archaeological material.

Scope and structure of the examination paper 2018–19

The three-hour paper will contain around fifteen essay questions concerning various of the topics covered in lectures, classes and supervisions. Candidates are required to answer three questions.

In 2019-20 the scope and structure of the paper will remain unchanged.

Course descriptions

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ROMAN WORLD, AD 284–476

This paper traces the history of the Mediterranean and Near East from the accession of Diocletian in 284 to the dissolution of the Roman Empire as a unified political structure in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. Three themes will stand in the centre of our attention.

First, we will explore the structure of the Roman state at the height of its power. In the period from the late third century onwards, the imperial administration became more present in the lives of its subjects than ever before. We will look at the shape of the ideologies on which emperors drew to justify the formation of a more energetic state apparatus. We will trace the relationship between landowning élites, peasants and slaves in this newly strengthened empire. And we will map the ways in which the introduction of a new taxation system recalibrated the relationship between urban and rural economies.

Secondly, we will explore the relationship between state power and religious authority in different late-antique societies. After the conversion of the emperor Constantine, Christianity gradually became the dominant religion in the Mediterranean and Near East. How did this development change Roman conceptions of the body and permissible sexual behaviour? What role did religious
institutions and charismatic leaders play in different late-antique societies? How did Roman policies towards minority groups differ from the ways in which religious difference was managed in Sasanian Iran?

Thirdly, we will analyse the impact of the breakup of the Roman Empire. In the late fifth and early sixth centuries, the eastern Mediterranean and Near East entered a prolonged period of stability and economic growth. By contrast, the western half of the empire fragmented into a group of successor states. We will trace the reasons for the weakening of imperial authority, map the ethnic self-understandings developed by the ruling élites of post-imperial polities and explore the economic effects of the end of the empire.

In addition to the lectures, there will also be four (2 hr) classes concentrating on ancient historiography.