

## RELIGION & POLITICS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

This Strategic Research Initiative concentrates on the interaction between religion and politics that has always served as a crucial determinant in the evolution of state and society in Turkey and the Black Sea region across time. Political ways of mobilising for, maintaining and contesting leadership and authority have often been expressed and transmitted through the use of religion. This theme has at times also merged with discussions on tradition and modernity as well as change and continuity regarding the development of state and society. In the Turkish context, this has not just influenced the evolution of the domestic environment and political systems but has also had an impact on the country's international standing and behaviour. Likewise, the balance between religion, state and society has also accompanied processes of state formation and nation building for other countries around the Black Sea, including during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

### Networks and crossroads: the geography of power in the fourth century AD

William Lewis | BIAA & Cardiff University

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Turkey and its ancient lands have long been cherished as a crossroad of civilisations, but in the fourth century AD it was a crossroad in a more literal sense. There were imperial capitals in Constantinople and Antioch, with the route between them leading through Ancyra, where Julian's column is still seen in Ulus commemorating one such journey. With the disputed Rhine and Danube frontiers to the northwest and the Sassanid conflict in the southeast, this particular route became a busy highway for emperors and their political and military elites, travelling to wherever they were needed most. The prestige of old Rome and centralised government had long since been overridden by the practicalities of frontier rule. Asia Minor's geographical position in the Empire had long brought it wealth and trade – now it brought power.

My own area of research focuses on the last generation of the Constantinian Dynasty (AD 337–363). In particular, I am interested in the diffusion of imperial power and the access to the workings of state that was increasingly granted to clerics of the newly legitimised Christian faith. My research has focused on the mechanisms behind this: the opportunities of influence and the shadowy and sprawling networks of personal connections behind them. Asia Minor is the natural starting point for such an investigation, because of both its geopolitical importance in the fourth century and its strong attestation in the sources.

Of the eight emperors who ruled or claimed to rule in the period AD 337–363, the longest lasting and most important

is Constantius II (r. AD 337–361). For most of his life he ruled from the East, primarily Antioch, and with his imperial sponsorship of Christianity this gave an unheard-of importance to the clergy of Asia Minor and Syria. A religion which had once been a parallel structure – separate from and in competition with the state – suddenly had personal access and moral authority over the most important figures in government, and even the emperor himself. How was this potential power to be leveraged? In whose interests was it going to be used, and why? How far did the networks stretch which underpinned so many of these imperial interactions?

The British Institute at Ankara's Research Scholarship has provided me with the necessary funding and resources to begin investigating these questions, and the short answer at this stage is that these networks appear to have been immense. While the Church was made up of individuals, and often opportunistic and self-interested ones, they existed within an organisation that had been developing systems of communication, regulation and self-government since the first century AD. Take, for example, the churchman Aëtius. He came into the imperial sphere in Antioch through the dynamics of alliance and opposition; it took not only the support of Bishop Leontius to win an audience with Gallus, Constantius' subordinate emperor at the time, but also a clash with rivals Basil and Eustathius.

Each of these men was not only an individual, but also a representative of a wide web of connections – via family, friendship, obligation, theology and geography. Their backgrounds and connections defined their interactions, while theology provided a suitable language for conflict. The competition for power and influence made sure that such views became polarised, and compromise in the middle ground became as risky as fanaticism. Important Sees were



Layers of history: Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman remains at Ayasuluk Fortress, Selçuk

made battlegrounds, with religion the direct or indirect fuel behind heavy rioting in Constantinople, Ancyra and Antioch. Churchmen used the potential power of the mob and the threat of instability to make sure their agendas were heard.

And the emperors, for the most part, were willing to hear them, rather than risk the kind of separate power structures that led to coups and civil wars. Theology became policy, and religious disputes became inseparable from imperial politics. The AD 340s in particular saw an early Cold War between the two halves of the Empire ruled by two brothers – Constantius and Constans – but split bitterly by the so-called Arian Controversy. It was this hardening of boundaries, both geographically and theologically, that

tightened ecclesiastical networks even as it divided them. The aim of my research is to show that these networks and the religious conflicts that grew from them were not caused solely by a clash of beliefs, but were rather the consequence of the opening of a whole new arena of competition for accessing power in the Roman world.

During my time at the British Institute at Ankara, alongside my work on building an academic contact database for the BIAA and expanding the digital resources (see my report on page 3), I finalised a PhD proposal to investigate these questions and themes further, and have since secured an AHRC-funded PhD position at Cardiff University, where I now continue my studies.