

Introduction

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Written artifacts peppered the late antique Mediterranean world. The extant record reveals a proliferation of scribal activity during this period on a wide range of media (e.g., parchment, papyrus, ceramic, and silver). Indeed, scribal practice facilitated social, practical, and intellectual transactions across various cultural domains, including religion, philosophy, law, health, and business. Roger Bagnall thus appropriately notes that “[e]ven if a large part of the population could not itself write or read...most adults nonetheless were participants in a system in which writing was constantly used.”¹ In short, writing, inscribed objects, and scribes played important roles in several dimensions of late antique life.

Despite the essential place of writing in late antique society, however, scribes had to negotiate their trade within the ever-shifting religious landscapes of late antiquity. Christianization – as it unfolded unevenly across time and space – encapsulated conflicting versions of Christianity, often with divergent views of approved and deviant artifacts, texts, and scribal technologies. It is not surprising, therefore, that scribes and their output became key discursive sites on which religious boundaries were drawn, maintained, and defended.

The following collection of essays explores the manifold ways books and scribal technologies posed, alleviated, or symbolized perceived dangers to late antique power structures, religious identities, and cultural practices. The papers examine late antique and

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¹ R. Bagnall, *Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 4.

medieval sources written in several languages (Greek, Coptic, Syriac, Latin, and Hebrew) from different regions of the Mediterranean area (e.g., Egypt, Babylonia, Mesopotamia, and North Africa). Although the artifacts and texts explored in this collection reflect many local, regional, and global religious traditions, the papers – both individually and collectively – focus on the relationship between scribal activity and religious boundaries within and across late antique Judaism and Christianity. For the benefit of the reader, the papers in this volume have been organized according to a rough chronological and regional order.

I. Dangerous Books and Religious Boundaries

Despite the relatively broad temporal and spatial parameters of this volume, several synthetic questions and issues pertaining to the role of books in constructing, maintaining, and defending religious boundaries motivate the essays. Why were certain scribal technologies considered dangerous? How were religious boundaries mapped onto books, texts, and other aspects of scribal culture? What did books symbolize in religious discourses?

The works of Roger Chartier, Guglielmo Cavallo, and Matthew Driscoll – to name just a few – ought to remind us that the materiality and format of a textual object could itself be suggestive, symbolic, or even semiotic.² It is no wonder, therefore, that certain scribal technologies *per se* were believed to violate religious boundaries within local contexts. Joseph E. Sanzo’s paper in this volume examines why ecclesiastical leaders, such as Augustine and Chrysostom, thought that textual objects suspended from one’s body for healing were inherently dangerous and thereby required condemnation. Such objects, argues Sanzo, often required or facilitated symbolic and social exchanges between believers and local ritual specialists and, consequently, encouraged the faithful to reimagine religious boundaries between Christianity and local, non-Christian traditions. Such exchanges prompted the critiques of these and other Christian leaders.

² E.g., G. Cavallo - R. Chartier, “Introduction,” in G. Cavallo - R. Chartier (eds.), *A History of Reading in the West* (transl. L.G. Cochrane; Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), pp. 1-36; M. Driscoll, “The Words on the Page: Thoughts on Philology, Old and New,” in J. Quinn – E. Lethbridge (eds.), *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions, Variability, and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2010), pp. 85-102.

The discursive world of books during late antiquity also involved a wide range of metaphors. Writers could metaphorically link the book – as an object – to dangerous ideas, individuals, and groups. Eduard Iricinschi’s paper shows how Epiphanius of Cyprus delegitimized the secret books of the ostensible Gnostics and Nicolaitans in his *Panarion* by comparing such objects to phantasms, illusions, and shadows. Focusing her gaze on the Syriac tradition, Flavia Ruani explicates the important function of metaphors for books in Ephrem’s *Hymns against the Heresies*. While Ephrem deployed metaphors of protection, shepherding, and medicine (cf. Epiphanius’ *Panarion*) to describe his heresiological writings, he uses language of dismemberment and disfigurement to depict the scribal habits of heretics. Ruani contends that, through such metaphorical dichotomizing, Ephrem was able to delineate – sometimes in humorous fashion – the differences between his theology and that of his opponents, succeeding in creating rigid boundaries in a heterogeneous Christian context.

Yet even manuscripts containing sacred texts and traditions could involve dangers to individuals and communities, especially if they were improperly handled. Such improprieties were often inextricably linked to concerns over religious boundaries and purity requirements. Gideon Bohak’s paper examines the purity requirements associated with manuscripts of Hekhalot literature. Stories found in texts such as the eleventh-century C.E. *Scroll of Ahimaaz*, reveal that certain Jews believed that Hekhalot manuscripts – if in proximity to people in an impure state (e.g., a menstruant) – could unleash terrible disasters, such as plagues. The transmission of a sacred tradition could also represent a perceived site of danger to a community. In his essay, Daniele Tripaldi highlights how the transmission process opened up avenues for exposing secret information to outsiders. Tripaldi argues that, in response to this perceived danger, certain Christians, such as the second- through fourth-century C.E. authors who wrote the *Book of Baruch*, the *Contestatio Jacobi*, the *Secret Gospel according to John* and the *Second Book of Jeu*, attempted to preserve the secrets contained in their sacred books through the swearing of oaths.

II. Religious Boundaries and Dangerous Books

The metaphors “boundary” and “border” likewise require critical reflection. Cartographical images of boundaries and borders have and continue to penetrate our nomenclature and narratives of late antiquity. To be sure, this volume hardly represents the first – or, for that matter, last – word on the metaphorical limits of boundaries, borders, and the like. In his important book on early Jewish-Christian relations, *Border Lines*, Daniel Boyarin engaged frontally with metaphors, such as “border” and “partitioning,” in order to disrupt yet another metaphor common at that time in the study of early Jewish-Christian relations, “the parting of the ways.”³ Drawing explanatory power from the artificiality of political and state borders – such as those between the USA and Mexico – Boyarin attacked the then prevailing idea that Jewish and Christian traditions bifurcated in late antiquity into two separate “religions.”

As Boyarin’s study suggests, boundary and border are usually found in scholarship alongside a host of other metaphorical descriptors, such as “blurred,” “crossed,” “defined,” “strict,” “policed,” or “porous.” But what exactly does it mean to claim that the religious boundaries between Jews and Christians, for instance, were blurred, crossed, policed, or defined? To what extent are such metaphorical combinations merely analytical – roughly corresponding to the ethnographic term “etic”? To what extent do they capture native taxonomies of religious similarity and difference – what we might cautiously deem “emic”?⁴

In his essay, Sanzo argues that, although “magic” is often assumed or claimed to be a domain of blurred or crossed boundaries, both the material record and patristic evidence suggest that many Christians participating in amuletic rituals drew clear and stark contrasts between Christians and non-Christians, even as they used local, non-Christian customs and idioms. As it pertains to much of the “magical” evidence from late antiquity, therefore, the notion of blurred or crossed boundaries reflects a purely etic perspective, a scholarly sum total or conflation of the multiple configurations of religious difference in the extant evidence.

³ D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaean-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). On the problems with the “parting-of-the-ways” model, see also the various essays in A.H. Becker - A. Yoshiko Reed (eds.), *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003; repr. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

⁴ On the problems with the emic-etic division, see especially M. Harris, “Emics and Etics Revisited,” in T.N. Headland - K. Pike - M. Harris (eds.), *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate* (London: Sage Publications, 1990), pp. 48-61.

Yonatan Moss's study reveals another dimension of premodern approaches to religious similarity and difference. His paper demonstrates that in a curious appendix to two West Syriac manuscripts of Barhebraeus's *Candelabra of the Sanctuary*, attributed to Cyril (of Alexandria?), the charge of Islam's mixing of cultural elements – what we might cautiously deem syncretism – does not carry an entirely negative tone. Indeed, this text, which likely dates some time between the eighth and thirteenth centuries C.E., stands apart from other West Syriac Christian ascriptions of Islamic blending by attributing some of the blended elements to Christianity.

As the papers of Sanzo and Moss show, the evidence often requires us to move beyond facile understandings of metaphors, such as blurred boundaries, crossed boundaries, or porous boundaries, when attempting to describe and analyze inter-cultural discourse and contact in antiquity. Yet, at the same time, the imagery of physical borders can offer a useful framework for thinking about cultural interactions, especially as it relates to late antique book culture.

In his recent monograph, *Theory of the Border*, Thomas Nail notes that what is common to borders between territorial, juridical, and economic entities is “the cut or process of social division itself.”⁵ Nail continues:

... what is common to all these types of borders is the status of the “between” that remains missing from each of the regimes of social power...it is not strictly a territorial, political, juridical, or economic phenomenon but equally an aterritorial, apolitical, nonlegal, and noneconomic phenomenon at the same time.⁶

Nail's contention that boundaries constitute liminal and ambiguous spaces between entities likewise characterizes the locus of books in late antiquity. In this sense, the inscribed object could function not only as a container of information about religious boundaries, but as a kind of boundary in and of itself. Textual objects in this period were interstitial, not completely belonging to any one religious group. As the papers of Ruani and Iricinschi in this volume intimate, books and scribal technologies could thus symbolize protection and beauty, on the one hand, or monstrosity and evil apparition, on the other hand.

⁵ T. Nail, *Theory of the Border* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 2.

⁶ *Ibi*, pp. 2-3.

Yet, like physical borders, inscribed objects can actually *do* things (at least in the minds of the social actors), as David Frankfurter's concluding essay highlights. Beyond their imagined capability of causing physical harm (cf. Bohak's paper), textualized artifacts had – and continue to have – the capacity to close, shut out, and divide. A biblical codex, for instance, does not merely convey scriptural content, but speaks materially and formally – through what is included and what is excluded – about the limits of divinely inspired truth. Conversely, inscribed objects could be imagined as endangering borders by opening up pathways from one ostensible side of the boundary to the other (cf. Sanzo's paper).

III. Conclusion

The papers gathered in this issue offer a composite reflection on how the concept of danger – in its own manifold perceptions – intersected with late antique and medieval book cultures. As the papers illustrate, danger implies a relation; it presupposes an object, a target, a fearsome interlocutor, sometimes left implicit. In this vein, the perception of danger typically emerged when different configurations of religious boundaries came into contact. Textualized objects gave expression to – and provided one of the primary means of exchange between – these multiple configurations in the late antique and medieval Mediterranean worlds.⁷

By attending to the manifold dangers that books were believed to have posed in late antiquity, the essays in this issue – both individually and collectively – offer a glimpse into a complex network of religious definitions, each one vying for legitimation and authority, each one promoting its own conception of religious boundaries. We hope this collection of essays will inspire future research on the conjuncture of scribal activity

⁷ This emphasis on religious plurality, however, should not imply that each manifestation has been afforded an equal place in religious definition. Political power – and by extension textual voice – has always been distributed unevenly. What is more, based in large part on the gaps in the extant evidence and the general scholarly predilection for “literary” sources, the perspectives of highly trained writers have figured prominently in scholarship on late antiquity. The authors embodying such ancient perspectives have been granted the privilege of framing scholarly ideas about religious boundaries and deviancy during late antiquity. On this unevenness, see R. Boustani - O. Kosansky - M. Rustow, “Introduction: Anthropology, History, and the Remaking of Jewish Studies,” in Id. (eds.), *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of Anthropology and History* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), pp. 1-28.

and perceived dangers to religious boundaries within and beyond late antiquity and the Mediterranean world.

