

1 Political Culture in Three Spheres

Introduction

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This book appears at a time when our understanding of the scope of the medieval world and the ways in which we should approach it are changing fast. With the globalising of historical studies across all periods, medievalists are eager to explore broader trans-regional contexts and to break out of long-standing disciplinary and area-studies silos. This enthusiasm is burgeoning into publications which sketch the contours of a middle ages extending far beyond western Europe and which treat Europe as just one region among many.¹ Underpinning this new focus is a desire to compare and to connect: to examine what different world regions had (or did not have) in common; and to establish if and how they were connected. But while the drivers for such global study are strong, most medievalists, including the editors and contributors to this volume, are regional specialists. If we are to extend lines of sight and engage in productive trans-regional and trans-cultural investigation, we need practical tools to help us survey broadly without losing specificity and nuance. This volume is an attempt to provide one such set of tools.

It focuses on the political culture of the Latin west, Byzantium and the Islamic world between around 700 and 1500, three entities we have

¹ J. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250–1350* (Oxford and New York, 1989); V. Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 2003); P. Boucheron *et al.* (eds), *Histoire du monde au XVe siècle* (Paris, 2009); B. Z. Kedar and M. E. Wiesner-Hanks (eds), *The Cambridge World History, V: Expanding Webs of Exchange and Conflict, 500 CE–1500 CE* (Cambridge, 2015); J. Coatsworth *et al.*, *Global Connections: Politics, Exchange, and Social Life in World History, I: To 1500* (Cambridge, 2015); C. Holmes and N. Standen (eds), *The Global Middle Ages, P&P Supplement 13* (Oxford, 2018); K. B. Berzock (ed.), *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa* (Philadelphia, 2019); see also important single-author studies including A. Haour, *Rulers, Warriors, Traders and Clerics: The Central Sahel and the North Sea* (Oxford, 2007); E. Lambourn, *Abraham's Luggage: A Social Life of Things in the Medieval Indian Ocean World* (Cambridge, 2018), as well as several journals with global or transregional foci: *Al-Masaq; Medieval Worlds; Medieval Encounters; The Medieval Globe; The Medieval History Journal*. See also n. 4.

termed ‘spheres’.² Although the book’s remit is chronologically and geographically broad, we do not claim that these three spheres are synonymous or coterminous with a ‘global middle ages’. Nor do we claim any special status for them: much of the medieval world, particularly in Africa, the Americas, South and East Asia, and Australasia, lay beyond them, and any fully global history of medieval political culture would include these regions, too. Because our chapters are largely intended as tools for comparative study, our focus is neither on connections nor on those zones where inter-sphere contact was particularly intense, such as the western Eurasian reaches of the land and maritime Silk Roads or the Mediterranean. Thus we do not offer deep investigation of mobility and exchange, both important themes in global medieval history. And while our time frame and geographical range is substantial, we do not offer systematic comparison between spheres, nor do we attempt an overarching grand narrative.³ Even within the fraction of the medieval world that we cover, our focus is partial: our primary concern is with the political culture of elites and especially with those elites whose power was sustained in a relationship with monarchy. But, as we hope to make clear, there are good reasons for adopting this particular geographical and thematic focus; and, to the best of our knowledge, no such introduction to the political cultures of these three spheres over such a time span currently exists.⁴

Our main aim is to provide a set of parallel studies to enable readers with experience in the history and historiography of one sphere to gain grounding in the fundamentals of the political cultures of the other two. We hope to provide a framework, or set of starting points, for those keen

² For ‘political culture’: pp. 5–16; also pp. 17–18, 506–9.

³ On the desirability of medieval historians engaging with large-scale comparison and grand narrative as a much-needed contribution to global history: A. Strathern, ‘Global early modernity and the problem of what came before’, in Holmes and Standen (eds), *Global Middle Ages*, 317–44.

⁴ Although note the integration of medieval materials pertaining to our three spheres into volumes concerned with rule and governance in Eurasia and beyond over a wider time frame, e.g. P. Fibiger Bang and C. A. Bayly (eds), *Tributary Empires in Global History* (Basingstoke, 2011); P. Fibiger Bang and D. Kołodziejczyk (eds), *Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History* (Cambridge, 2012); the series *Rulers & Elites: Comparative Studies in Governance*, especially in the later medieval and early modern centuries, e.g. J. Duindam et al. (eds), *Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires: A Global Perspective* (Leiden, 2011); L. G. Mitchell and C. P. Melville (eds), *Every Inch a King: Comparative Studies on Kings and Kingship in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Leiden, 2013); J. Duindam et al. (eds), *Law and Empire: Ideas, Practices, Actors* (Leiden, 2013); R. van Leeuwen, *Narratives of Kingship in Eurasian Empires, 1300–1800* (Leiden, 2017); J. Duindam and S. Dabringhaus (eds), *The Dynastic Centre and the Provinces: Agents and Interactions* (Leiden, 2014); M. van Berkel and J. Duindam (eds), *Prince, Pen and Sword: Eurasian Perspectives* (Leiden, 2018).

to work at a comparative level across spheres or to explore overlaps and entanglements between them. Individual chapters refer to current specialist scholarship and may be of interest to subject specialists, but our overriding concern is to make these spheres accessible to non-specialists. Indeed, it is those chapters that lie *outside* a given reader's specialist knowledge that are likely to be of greatest interest and utility to that reader. For this reason, a glossary of some specialist terms and proper names is also provided (see pp. 510–16).

In presenting these parallel studies we are conscious that comparative history on a broad geographical scale poses methodological challenges. Most immediately, it calls for an approach that recognises conceptual and linguistic boundaries but also allows scholars to transcend them. Timothy Reuter pointed to the rather different meanings that, even within a fairly limited geographical area in the Latin west, were attached to terms such as lordship, *seigneurie* and *Herrschaft*. Each described an economic system based on the extortion of surplus from agricultural labour by elites who were themselves normally defined by their military or religious expertise. Yet each also reflected distinctive academic traditions of engaging with the medieval past, the type and nature of evidence surviving in a given region and the conceptual toolkits developed for interpreting it.⁵ So comparative study needs appropriate points for comparison but also questions that are informed by what makes each topic or region distinctive.⁶ It also requires an understanding of the contexts from which discourses, practices and conventions emerged; and of the cultural, political and socio-economic horizons of expectation and practice with which people in the past engaged. Thus, in order to make meaningful comparisons as to how power was exercised and thought about in the Latin west, Byzantium and the Islamic world, we need to speak a shared conceptual language. If lordship, *seigneurie* and *Herrschaft* can have widely divergent meanings, how much greater is the room for misunderstanding when comparing terms such as *imperator*, *basileus* and caliph? Used to describe emperors in the Latin west, the rulers of Byzantium (or east Rome) and the leaders of the Islamic *umma*, all three could be translated as 'monarch'. But defaulting to such a generalisation does little

⁵ T. Reuter, 'Kings, nobles, others: "base" and "superstructure" in the Ottonian period', in *MPMM*, 300–24 at 304–8. See also N. Vincent, 'Sources and methods: some Anglo-German comparisons', in T. Huthwelker *et al.* (eds), *Princely Rank in Late Medieval Europe: Trodden Paths and Promising Avenues* (Ostfildern, 2011), 119–38; C. Wickham, 'Problems in doing comparative history', in P. J. Skinner (ed.), *Challenging the Boundaries of Medieval History: The Legacy of Timothy Reuter* (Turnhout, 2009), 5–28.

⁶ As Bruce Lincoln has shown, asking about apples and oranges and why they are different – even if both are fruits – can be revealing: B. Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges: Explorations In, On, and With Comparison* (Chicago, 2018).

to illuminate the wider cultural signifiers that attach to these specific terms; nor would it accommodate the rather different conceptualisations of the religious and secular in each of the three spheres.

Thus we aim not only to present a set of parallel studies but also to attempt discussions within a shared conceptual framework. We present that framework not as a rigid strait-jacket into which the three spheres must be squeezed at all costs. Rather, these chapters have been shaped by a series of basic preliminary questions about the components of political culture which we asked our authors to bear in mind when writing. These questions are listed in the Appendix to this volume. Developed during a series of prepublication workshops held in Aberystwyth, Oxford and York, the questions were meant to encourage our authors to think about similar structures and processes across the three spheres while also allowing them scope to highlight areas of distinctiveness within and between their broader geographical specialisms. Our inspiration for this approach was the question-led methodology underpinning Nora Berend's project on Christianisation in Scandinavia, central Europe and Rus, albeit revised to take account of the much wider cultural and geographical range of the present volume.⁷ Just as our efforts build on Berend's work, so we hope that this book will contribute to current thinking about how medievalists should tackle comparisons on even broader, perhaps even global, scales. We would argue that our approach sidesteps two widely acknowledged risks in the practice of global history: first, the presentation of a cacophony of voices which never quite tune into a composite whole; and second, the flattening and homogenising of the specific and the local, the individual and the particular.⁸ Our approach offers one route out of such dilemmas: by developing a series of framing questions, fleshed out and tested by our various contributors, each of whom was in communication with the others but who nonetheless focused primarily on their own area of expertise, we have sketched out a framework to facilitate comparison.⁹

⁷ N. Berend (ed.), *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus', c.900–1200* (Cambridge, 2007).

⁸ R. Drayton and D. Motadel, 'Discussion: the futures of global history', *Journal of Global History* 13 (2018), 1–21; M. Tamm, 'Interview with Sebastian Conrad', www.academia.edu/37795184/The_Aims_and_Achievements_of_Global_History_Interview_with_Sebastian_Conrad (accessed 1 December 2019); see also S. Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, 2016). Recent methodological debates among medievalists interested in global history have focused on how to avoid these dangers: e.g. C. Holmes and N. Standen, 'Introduction: towards a global middle ages', in Holmes and Standen (eds), *Global Middle Ages*, 1–44 at 20–5.

⁹ Just as easily, it lends itself to a more pointillist approach where specific case studies are used to sketch a broader picture that combines the general with the specific: see e.g.

So what are the fundamental premises of this book? What do we mean by ‘political culture’ and why does this matter? Why have we chosen to focus primarily on elites and monarchy? And why, when monarchy was a type of political organisation shared by many cultures beyond the Latin west, Byzantium and the Islamic world, do we focus on these three spheres? Why conceptualise these worlds as ‘spheres’ at all? And why choose to start around 700 and end around 1500, when some formations we are describing can be identified in the early medieval centuries before 700 as well as those which come after 1500?¹⁰ In the rest of these introductory remarks, we summarise what we mean by key terms, justify the parameters we have imposed and outline the contours of the book as a whole.

The main anchor to this volume is ‘political culture’. We have chosen to frame our shared concern with the theory and practice of power in this way, conscious that ‘political culture’ is itself a contested notion.¹¹ Aware of the challenges, we have chosen a pragmatic approach, recognising that any concept used to examine medieval theories and practices of power is open to debate. ‘Political culture’ is adopted here as an umbrella term for the many different dimensions of elite power relations in the three spheres. It is a formulation that offers some very basic interpretative space within which the three spheres can be discussed in parallel – a space broad enough to allow us to overcome, or at least accommodate, different

P. Lambert and B. Weiler (eds), *How the Past was Used: Historical Cultures, 700–2000* (Oxford, 2017).

¹⁰ ‘Pre-modern’ can, after all, cover virtually any period of human history up to the eighteenth century. On the problems of defining ‘modernity’ and demarcating the ‘pre-modern’, see D. L. Smail and A. Shryock, ‘History and the “pre”’, *American Historical Review* 118 (2013), 709–37, esp. 713–17. For more on whether ‘medieval’ is a helpful term to describe anything other than the western middle ages, and perhaps not even to describe those: T. Reuter, ‘Medieval: another tyrannous construct’, in *MPMM*, 19–37; D. M. Varisco, ‘Making “medieval” Islam meaningful’, *Medieval Encounters* 13 (2007), 385–412. Similar methodological concerns have been raised in connection with the study of late medieval and early modern Eurasia: J. Duindam, ‘Prince, pen and sword: Eurasian perspectives’, in van Berkel and Duindam (eds), *Prince, Pen and Sword*, 542–66, esp. 542–4.

¹¹ For its oft-debated genealogy in wider humanistic and social sciences scholarship, see e.g. G. Almond and S. Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, 1963); R. Welch, *The Concept of Political Culture* (Basingstoke, 1993); G. Gendzel, ‘Political culture: genealogy of a concept’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28 (1997), 225–50; G. Steinmetz (ed.), *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca, NY, 1999); R. Barker, *Legitimizing Identities: The Self-Presentation of Rulers and Subjects* (Cambridge, 2001); R. Formisano, ‘The concept of political culture’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31 (2001), 393–426; S. Welch, *The Theory of Political Culture* (Oxford, 2013); P. Crooks and T. H. Parsons (eds), *Empires and Bureaucracies in World History: From Late Antiquity to the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2016).

conceptualisations of power among medieval contemporaries in those spheres and among modern scholars who work on them.

We are conscious that this approach may already be familiar to many scholars working on political history in the Latin west, particularly those who have moved away from looking at top-down administrative structures and events to focus on the ideas, assumptions and practices which shaped the conduct of political life. Yet ‘political culture’ is a term that has been less frequently invoked by scholars working on Byzantine and Islamic political societies. Of course, there have been landmark studies which take a largely political culture approach or which reflect on component parts of what might be construed as political culture.¹² But there is relatively little scholarship on either Byzantium or the Islamic world which provides an extensive framework for thinking about medieval political culture in the manner that Gerd Althoff’s *Family, Friends and Followers* does for the medieval Latin west between the sixth and twelfth centuries.¹³ Systematic comparisons of the three spheres’ political cultures have also been rare, other than in German scholarship.¹⁴ Nonetheless, some recent volumes suggest that much can be gained by putting the three spheres’ political cultures into conversation with one another. Although with a shorter time frame than ours, *The ‘Abbasid and Carolingian Empires*, edited by Deborah Tor, offers rich and suggestive comparisons between the concepts and modes of rulership of these vast political orders and the ways in which they both reflected and inflected their respective social contexts.¹⁵ And despite some wariness about ‘culture’, *Diverging Paths?*, edited by John Hudson and Ana Rodríguez, yields valuable perspectives on political culture in its approach to jurisprudence

¹² For Byzantium, e.g. J.-C. Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963–1210)* (Paris, 1990); G. Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre: étude sur le ‘césaropapisme’ byzantin* (Paris, 1996); English tr. J. Birrell, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium* (Cambridge, 2003); for the Islamic world, R. P. Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton, 1980); *IHFI*; M. Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350* (Cambridge, 1994); W. W. Clifford, ‘Ubi sumus? Mamluk history and social theory’, *MSR* 1 (1997), 45–62.

¹³ G. Althoff, *Family, Friends and Followers: Political and Social Bonds in Medieval Europe*, tr. C. Carroll (Cambridge, 2004).

¹⁴ J. R. Österle, *Kalifat und Königtum: Herrschaftsrepräsentation der Fatimiden, Ottonen und frühen Salier an religiösen Hochfesten* (Darmstadt, 2009); A. Höfert, *Kaisertum und Kalifat: der imperiale Monotheismus im Früh- und Hochmittelalter* (Frankfurt, 2015). A classic Anglophone study of rulership in the early medieval west and Byzantium is M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge, 1986). Ceremonial cultures in the Mediterranean which draw on Byzantine, Islamic and Latin traditions are considered in parallel in A. D. Beihammer et al. (eds), *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean: Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden, 2013).

¹⁵ D. G. Tor (ed.), *The ‘Abbasid and Carolingian Empires: Comparative Studies in Civilizational Formation* (Leiden, 2017).

in the three spheres, on the workings of legal systems, and on fiscal exactions and other such mechanisms of governance, all set against the symbols and places whereby power was expressed or concretised.¹⁶ Perhaps closer still to the themes that we explore is *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World*, edited by Walter Pohl, Clemens Gantner and Richard Payne, which, in examining the transformation of the Roman and Iranian worlds of late antiquity, deals with the interplay of power, belief and religious organisation.¹⁷ A key feature of this study is the ways in which, following the Roman empire's demise in the west, subsequent regimes merged regional or ethnic rallying calls with Christian ideals of all-embracing community; and there are illuminating comparisons with Islam, where no attempt was made to enforce religious unanimity, and tribal affiliations (actual or adopted) continued to count for the holders or seekers of high office.

Important as issues such as identity are for getting at the texture of politics, we would suggest that any broad enquiry into the political cultures of the three spheres should start with some rather more basic questions. As Stephen Humphreys argues in his chapter, there is something to be said for narrowing one's scope to Harold Lasswell's question: 'Who gets what, when and how?' In answering this, Humphreys identifies and develops some clear and compelling coordinates for an understanding of political culture across our three spheres. The chapters which follow build in different ways on Humphreys' thinking in their exploration of political culture as the interplay between context, norm and practice. Thus after Humphreys' chapter and a general survey of those primary sources most germane to political culture in the three spheres, we have three sections, each of three chapters, one for each sphere. The first section, entitled 'Historical Contexts', sets the geopolitical scene. Without essaying blow-by-blow accounts, the chapters in this section set out the developments and happenings that gave each sphere its characteristics, as well as its potential for fissures. The next section, 'Norms, Values and Their Propagation', covers the justifications for those wielding power or aiming for predominance, along with the rites, theories and formulae denoting legitimate authority before which all should defer. The third section, 'Practice and Organisation', attends not only to matters of administration but also the practical rules and tangible resources shaping the conduct of political life. As in any study of political culture, the interplay between the holding of office purportedly for general benefit

¹⁶ J. Hudson and A. Rodríguez (eds), *Diverging Paths? The Shapes of Power and Institutions in Medieval Christendom and Islam* (Leiden, 2014).

¹⁷ W. Pohl et al. (eds), *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300–1100* (Abingdon, 2012).

and the pursuit of personal, familial or factional gain looms large. As noted earlier, this book is not in itself a work of comparative history. However, in the spirit of providing guidance, throughout the volume we provide some cross-references between chapters so that readers can follow up on potential inter-sphere comparative leads, and in the final chapter of the book we offer a glance at some striking parallels and differences in political culture between the three spheres.

We have chosen to focus above all on self-styled worldwide empires – or on polities emerging within or near the vestiges of such an empire or in its aftermath. This approach foregrounds monarchy and elites of various types, as well as the sweeping powers they were able to gain and subsequently sought to retain. Empires and other polities with grandiose pretensions could not have gained momentum without nurturing some sense of manifest destiny, visions of truth and duty revealed from higher powers. For this reason, our chapters pay considerable attention to professions of piety and justifications for the use of power; and to hegemonial ideologies bolstered by religious doctrine. But this public face of admirable ideals is barely half the story. This volume therefore also aims to set out, as Humphreys puts it, the ‘rules of the game’, whether the goal was the topmost, monarchical, seat; lesser posts in the hierarchy; or simply the acquisition or retention of position and possessions amongst regional elites and local powerbrokers. These rules comprised the ways in which rulers were expected to conduct themselves; the expectations placed upon them by fellow members of political elites but also by the population at large; along with the fouls that might cost a ruler his or her throne or other players their position in the power game. Practical matters of organisation and administration are presented in their essentials, and attention is given to the smaller-scale or looser-knit polities. But the *modus operandi* of those playing for high stakes in great empires or amidst their remnants takes centre stage.

As will become clear, the types of elite varied between polities. In some, power was widely diffused, the principles of pluralism, consultation and representation being proclaimed positive virtues, with ever-broader cross sections of society drawn into political life. Nonetheless, the power-play at imperial or royal courts remains a crucial coordinate, along with the activities of various other kinds of political heavyweights: the churchmen, provincial aristocrats, military commanders and other leaders of hierarchies which underpinned the political leadership but were not always synonymous with it. Some may question an emphasis on overarching authority and on the nodal points and elites it fostered. Marginal groupings and subaltern societies should, however, themselves come into sharper focus through a survey of the power

dynamics of self-styled centres and over-rulers. Studying political culture involves assessing how its tentacles reach out, as well the conditions under which they are embraced, refined, refocused, resisted or simply deemed irrelevant.

In some periods, the empires and realms at the heart of this book were almost coterminous with the geographical extent and political elite of a particular sphere. In others, the spheres may be characterised in part or whole by smaller units, including kingdoms (in the Latin west), alternative caliphates and emirates (in the Islamic world), and (especially in formerly Byzantine lands) pocket empires which arose from the detritus of grander structures, many of them aspiring to the former empire's majesty or using aspects of that empire's political culture for the purposes of their self-legitimation. All three spheres are richly documented, partly because of a feature they shared: the prominence – more or less all-encompassing – of monotheistic religion and the value it placed on the written word. It is striking that Islamic writers from the seventh century onwards singled out the Christians and the Jews from other unbelievers and polytheists. These were 'the Peoples of the Book', who set store by divine truths put down in their scriptures, albeit now failing to see that the Qur'an contained the ultimate truth about the one true God, as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. It was the belief that they were carrying out God's instructions that drove armies across swathes of territory in the early centuries of Islam. And their faith in a single God, shared with the proponents of Christianity and Judaism, put a premium on monarchical power.

Not, of course, that upholding monotheism meant a guarantee of vast or long-lasting empire. Thus, the adherence of the Jews to monotheism and their regard for kingship did not translate into territorial empire, with the ninth-century adoption of Judaism by the semi-nomadic polity of the Khazars constituting only a partial exception.¹⁸ Conversely, one should not suppose that monotheism was a precondition of extensive imperial power or of the privileging of written culture. The empires of East Asia serve to illustrate this caveat. Although the emperors of China styled themselves the 'heaven-born', signalling their special bond with the cosmos and supernal powers, the imperial order was not geared to a divine plan for mankind in the manner of its Islamic and Christian counterparts. The philosophy of Confucianism envisioned a hierarchy culminating with the emperor, but not one committed to monotheism. Rather, the emperor

¹⁸ A much earlier instance of conversion to Judaism and the growth of a polity defined by that faith is provided by the Himyarite kingdom in the southwest of the Arabian peninsula during the fifth and early sixth centuries.

presided over sundry cults and ethical codes, holding the benevolent command over earthlings that his 'Mandate of Heaven' entailed.¹⁹

So, although the Chinese empire is very well-documented, and although its ideology was adopted as a model by other East Asian polities, including Japan, it lacked the stance of monotheism taken up by the rulers of the three spheres considered here together with the religious interpreters and exegetes who were integral to those monotheisms. Not that rulers were always committed to evangelising or even to enforcing monotheism. Conversely, claims to be expanding the faith were sometimes a mask for aggression. Still less did a general commitment to monotheism bring about political harmony within a sphere. As the following chapters will show, bitter conflict arose within single spheres over whose was the correct interpretation of the sacred writings or which was the best way to define or worship the one true God. Even so, the focus on monotheism did yield coordinates, points of tension and a kind of envelope for containing conflicts. The religions of Christianity and Islam alike were all-encompassing in their provision of doctrine, cosmology and ethical code along with the apparatus for worship. At the same time, their insistence on monotheism put a premium on monarchy – that is, on he (sometimes she) who convincingly laid claim to be interpreter of God's testament (as revealed through the scriptures and the Qu'ran) and enactor of God's will on earth. This, of course, opened the door to disputations and critiques of rulers' performance. No monarch could, in practice, pay regard to interpretation and enforcement singlehandedly. In all three spheres, a separate, clerical, organisation arose to interpret scriptures and doctrine and to oversee the faithful. Indeed, in the Latin west the clergy came under the care of the papacy, which was, from the eleventh century on, taking a robust alternative line to that offered by the western emperors.²⁰ The pope's blueprint for clerical authoritarianism made him God's representative on earth, replete with imperial symbols. While Latin Christendom became characterised by the more or less standing confrontation between their two visions, they see-sawed on the relative weight of emperor and pope rather than on their right to exist. In other words, these antagonisms played out within a conceptual framework that held even after the development of urban federations and other

¹⁹ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors* (Berkeley, 1961), 104–23, 127–43; C. A. Hucker, *China's Imperial Past: An Introduction to China's History and Culture* (Berkeley, 1975), 54–7, 69–82, 87–92, 193–202; R. L. Nadeau (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Guide to Chinese Religions* (Oxford, 2012), esp. K. Knapp, 'The Confucian tradition in China', 147–69 and J. Miller, 'Nature', 349–68; A. Strathern, *Unearthly Powers: Religious and Political Change in World History* (Cambridge, 2019), 20–6, 129–34.

²⁰ See pp. 53, 146, 387.

alternative forms of polity, as well as the changes unleashed by printing and by Martin Luther.²¹

Besides their commitment to monotheism along with monarchical ideals, the Latin west, Byzantium and the Islamic world shared what amounted to a common past. They had all come under the sway of the superpowers of late-antique western Eurasia: Iran and Rome. Indeed, a fundamental tenet of Byzantine ideology was that the Roman empire was still in place; its ruler continued to style himself 'Roman emperor' until the fall of the capital, Constantinople, to the Ottomans in 1453, a title which was then adopted by the new ruler Mehmed II, together with many of the conceptual underpinnings. Having been under Roman rule in its heyday, Byzantium and many of the Christian powers of the Latin west benefited from its apparatus for control: the road networks, urban centres (chosen partly to foster trade) and imposing monuments, most spectacular of which was the city of Rome itself. Texts and variants of Roman law remained in use in Byzantine law-courts and across the Christian Mediterranean. And even to the north of the Alps, the literate classes – mainly churchmen, before the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries – drew on a common stockpile deriving from Greco-Roman culture, including the natural sciences and mathematics. Such skills were often in high demand at the courts of Islamic rulers, where works of literature, philosophy, science and treatises on kingship from ancient Iran as well as Greece were translated. Muslim and Jewish intellectuals, along with scholars from the Christian populations living under Islamic rule, mobilised this storehouse of ancient knowledge in the development of new bodies of knowledge, which were in turn transmitted to the Latin west and back to Byzantium.²²

The combination of monotheism and monarchy provided coordinates for each sphere, laying down markers for their internal conflicts. But it also laid down a sort of mutually competitive agenda. This stance of antagonism itself prompted many types of writings in all three spheres, not least those which formatted the past in the cause of religious and political authority.²³ But this cultural repertoire encompassed a broader

²¹ See pp. 144–6, 171–6, 268–73, 288–9.

²² See p. 341. On Islamic co-opting of aspects of Iranian symbols and ideals of rulership: p. 19; on the transmission of late antique knowledge in Greek to the Islamic world: D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th Centuries)* (London, 1998); and then back again to Byzantium: M. V. Mavroudi, *A Byzantine Book on Dream Interpretation: The Oneirocriticon of Achmet and its Arabic Sources* (Leiden, 2002).

²³ For the way in which opposing communities could couch their claims within shared coordinates: T. Sizgorich, 'Religious history', in S. Foot and C. F. Robinson (eds), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing, II: 400–1400* (Oxford, 2012), 604–27 at 624. See also Höfert, *Kaisertum und Kalifat*.

band of issues involving hierarchy, ethics and social behaviour. Not coincidentally, the formatting of the past, whether to forge a collective identity or to promote or indict a particular regime or school of thought, was integral to political culture within all three of our spheres. This emerges from our chapters in this volume;²⁴ and the fruitfulness of such an approach can also be seen from another multi-authored work focused on the Latin west but offering glances at the broader ‘monotheistic world, stretching from the Atlantic to the Arabian Sea’.²⁵

Such overlap raises the question of how far the spheres were separate, self-contained, entities and, indeed, of what is really meant by ‘sphere’. Addressing the former question, one should note that Islam was conceived in opposition to the imperial order of Byzantium and Iran, with every expectation of replacing it. Moreover the Byzantines’ sense of their own identity was sharpened by closer encounters with traders and warriors of the Latin world from the eleventh century on. This is not to claim that lines of demarcation between the spheres were clear-cut. Broad swathes of the Latin as well as the Islamic world, for instance, continued to be receptive to cultural tropes and religious cults emanating from Byzantium, while in the process of reception transforming purposes and meanings.²⁶ Many polities in Mediterranean regions, including Iberia, Sicily, and even the Latin kingdom and principalities which grew up in Syria and Palestine after the First Crusade (1099), often fused aspects of the political culture from at least two of the spheres under consideration here, even when their rulers professed allegiance to only one.²⁷ Indeed, one way of thinking about spheres of political culture is as force fields: zones of activity exerting powerful magnetism and diverting particles from their former trajectories.²⁸

²⁴ See pp. 77, 80–2, 105–7, 124–5, 148–9, 240, 265–6, 268–9, 292–3, 302–4, 334, 351. See also P. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance; Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, 1996), esp. 134–57; M. Kempshall, *Rhetoric and the Writing of History, 400–1500* (Manchester, 2011); Lambert and Weiler (eds), *How the Past was Used*.

²⁵ M. Borgolte, ‘A crisis of the middle ages? Deconstructing and constructing European identities in a globalised world’, in G. A. Loud and M. Staub (eds), *The Making of Medieval History* (York, 2017), 70–84 at 78. The proven benefits of a comparative approach, encompassing Byzantium and the Middle East besides the west and utilising other disciplines, are highlighted by J. L. Nelson, ‘Why reinventing medieval history is a good idea’, in *ibid.*, 17–36 at 26–33.

²⁶ See pp. 191–3.

²⁷ On Sicily: J. Johns, *The Arabic Administration of Norman Sicily* (Cambridge, 2002); on the early thirteenth-century Latin Empire of Constantinople, S. Burkhardt, *Mediterranes Kaisertum und imperiale Ordnungen: das lateinische Kaiserreich von Konstantinopel* (Berlin, 2014); on the Latin states in the east: C. H. MacEvitt, *The Crusades and the Christian World of the East: Rough Tolerance* (Philadelphia, 2008).

²⁸ J. Shepard, ‘Byzantium’s overlapping circles’, in E. Jeffreys (ed.), *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London, 21–26 August 2006, I: Plenary Papers* (Aldershot, 2006), 15–55; *idem*, ‘Superpower to soft power, within overlapping circles:

Yet for all its attractions, the image of a force field does not quite capture the connotations of a sphere as an entity possessing some sort of magnetic centre – potentially more than one – whilst allowing for multi-directional traffic and free-willed adherence on the part of outsiders. The workings of such a sphere underwrote Byzantium's claims to worldwide leadership. Known simply as 'the City', Constantinople stood at the hub of imperial power, high society and culture, ecclesiastical administration, and commerce until its sack by the Fourth Crusaders in 1204. This amounted to a conjunction of interest groups rather than explicitly harmonious agreement about the merits of empire. Indeed, many monks (and some churchmen, too) were more preoccupied with the heavenly kingdom and their 'spiritual father' along with centres like Mount Athos ('the Holy Mountain').²⁹ But the powers of attraction were all the greater for often being consensual. Constantinople drew in multifarious outsiders, becoming a place of pilgrimage for such believers as Anthony of Novgorod and his fellow Rus whose ancestors had adopted Byzantium's brand of Christianity.³⁰ The term 'sphere' also befits the dynamics of Islam, whose ideology was (like Byzantium's) universalist, deeming the caliph 'God's shadow on earth' and the Abbasid court at Baghdad the measure of all things. Many other places were sacred, but care of the holiest pilgrimage centres, Mecca and Medina, was the duty of the supreme ruler.³¹ Emperors and other potentates in the Latin west lacked a physical locus of authority of the stature enjoyed by the Byzantine *basileus* and the caliph. But in the west lay a city whose very name had long been synonymous with worldwide rule, and the papal elite ensconced in Rome was, from the eighth century onwards, invoking its right to bestow earthly authority on deserving candidates in the west.³²

Byzantium and its place in twenty-first-century international history', in B. Haider-Wilson *et al.* (eds), *Internationale Geschichte in Theorie und Praxis / International History in Theory and Practice* (Vienna, 2017), 81–122.

²⁹ See pp. 315–16, 426. The term 'imperial-ecclesiastical complex' seems apt enough to denote the multi-part, negotiable and so not wholly stable, interrelationship between the imperial power, the hierarchies and informal affinities making up the patriarchate, and the webs of monastic communities. See p. 78; see also pp. 311–15.

³⁰ Anthony of Novgorod, *Die Kniga palomnik des Antonij von Novgorod*, ed. and German tr. A. Jouravel (Wiesbaden, 2019); also G. P. Majeska, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Washington, DC, 1984).

³¹ See pp. 77–80, 105, 166, 340, 353–4.

³² Its foundation text was, effectively, the 'Donation of Constantine'. Written in the later eighth century in the name of Constantine the Great (d. 337), it purports to grant the pope authority over the empire in the west: *Das Constitutum Constantini (Konstantinische Schenkung): Text*, ed. H. Fuhrmann (Hanover, 1968); tr. in P. E. Dutton (ed.), *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*, 2nd edn (Peterborough, ON, 2004), 14–22; J. Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom*, rev. edn (London, 2001), 385–9.

The emergence of the Franks as contenders for predominance across the Latin west makes the period spanning the turn of the seventh and eighth centuries an apt starting point for the discussion of our three spheres. It was, after all, the victory of Charles Martel at Poitiers in 732 that served to discourage further Muslim raiding deep into Francia.³³ And his grandson Charlemagne's claim, on the strength of God-given conquests, to be restoring imperial order in the west was solemnised by coronation at the hands of Pope Leo III in St Peter's Church, Rome, in 800. The interrelationship then forged between empire and the papacy along with the city of Rome would set the style for later bids for imperial hegemony in the west, while the zeal for instruction and control which Charlemagne embodied gave rise to precedents and texts still resonant five or six centuries later.³⁴ The early eighth century was also a time of triumph for Islamic armies, and it was under the Umayyad caliphs that rites and monuments of monarchical rule began to be elaborated, overtaking the more collegiate line taken by Muhammad's immediate successors.³⁵ In 716–18 Caliph Suleiman sent his brother to capture Constantinople, and, although the encirclement by land and sea ultimately failed, the Byzantines were now on the defensive, with too few territories for their claims to worldwide overlordship to ring true.³⁶ This era saw the development of an exclusive ideology, casting the Byzantines as a Chosen People, undergoing God's punishment for their sins.³⁷ The eighth century was, then, a time of two new empires rising and an ancient one reeling.³⁸

Despite its fragility in the eighth century, Byzantium persisted in upholding 'Roman' imperium in the eastern Mediterranean for another seven centuries, until its last outcrop, Trebizond, fell to the Ottomans in 1461, eight years after Mehmed II conquered the long-term imperial capital Constantinople. These events take us to our end point. It could be argued that Byzantium's disappearance as a polity in the fifteenth century – more accurately a set of polities, given that Trebizond was governed by a different dynasty from Constantinople – did not spell the

³³ Although Muslim enclaves continued in some northern Mediterranean locations, most famously at Fraxinetum, for two centuries or more: S. G. Bruce, *Cluny and the Muslims of La Garde-Freinet: Hagiography and the Problem of Islam in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY, 2016).

³⁴ See pp. 141, 274–5. ³⁵ See pp. 103, 235. ³⁶ See p. 183. ³⁷ See p. 301.

³⁸ The multi-authored volume edited by D. G. Tor has also highlighted the importance of this period, drawing attention to the templates for rulership and social order created by the Carolingians and the Abbasids, as well as the ways in which they moulded or inspired not only political cultures but also the broader social forms and ideological claims that would follow: D. G. Tor, 'The 'Abbasid and Carolingian dynasties in comparative perspective', in *eadem* (ed.), *'Abbasid and Carolingian Empires*, 3–10 at 6–7.

end of a Byzantine sphere. Some Eastern Christian polities would thrive throughout the early modern centuries.³⁹ Nonetheless, the erasure of Byzantine power in the east had such profound consequences – not only for the Byzantine sphere itself but for the other two spheres too – as to make the fifteenth century a crucial watershed in the shared history of these three spheres. Although the empire's demise was hardly unexpected, the repercussions were far-reaching. The imperial order which the Ottomans set about imposing was strongly shaped by the political traditions and formation of earlier Islamic regimes whose origins lay in the Eurasian steppes.⁴⁰ But they used their vantage point in Constantinople (Istanbul) to reorganise fiscal and judicial administration across much of the Islamic world.⁴¹ This fuelled a formidable war machine which had taken over swathes of Hungarian territory by 1550 and kept western Europe in its sights for another century or so. One might speak of a geopolitical shift to the Islamic world's advantage, especially as over many centuries it had been gaining converts around the Indian Ocean world, in South and South-East Asia and in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁴² The fragmentation of the west, in contrast, was such that the Ottomans found a useful – and willing – ally in one of its foremost powers, France.⁴³ At the same time, English and other privateers were preying on the merchantmen laden with silver from the New World that bolstered the Hapsburgs' resistance to Ottoman expansion in the Mediterranean, short-term opportunism which found justification in the religious upheavals unleashed by Luther's teachings. So, by the sixteenth century, the outlook for the Latin west was mixed.⁴⁴ Its polities, mostly fairly puny compared to the Byzantine or Abbasid empires in their heyday, could not count on withstanding the Ottoman advance.

Between *c.*700 and *c.*1500 there was considerable evolution in the political culture of each of the three spheres analysed here. Yet these spheres not only evolved internally: they also existed in a dynamic relationship with each other. As medievalists engage more closely with the global history agendas of comparison and connection-tracing over

³⁹ See p. 490.

⁴⁰ D. Kastritsis, 'Conquest and political legitimization in the early Ottoman empire', in J. Harris and C. Holmes (eds), *Byzantines, Latins and Turks in the Eastern Mediterranean World after 1150* (Oxford, 2012), 221–45; *idem*, 'Tales of viziers and wine: interpreting early Ottoman narratives of state centralization', in J. Van Steenberghe (ed.), *Trajectories of State Formation across Fifteenth-Century Islamic West-Asia: Eurasian Parallels, Connections and Divergences* (Leiden, 2020), 224–54.

⁴¹ See pp. 123–4, 231–2, 451–3. ⁴² See p. 490.

⁴³ N. Malcolm, *Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450–1750* (Oxford, 2019), 110–19.

⁴⁴ See pp. 176–7.

a variety of geographical scales – local, regional and planetary – we would expect that many of the features of the political cultures highlighted here will be nuanced, refined and even refuted. This will undoubtedly involve integrating research on other, non-monarchical aspects of the political culture of the three spheres; on the geographical zones or areas of cultural production where contact and interaction between spheres was at its most intense; and on zones beyond the Latin west, Byzantium and the Islamic world. We could easily imagine a companion volume whose organising principle is the interaction across spheres rather than their presentation in parallel. Any such volume would necessarily focus more squarely on connection and entanglement (*l'histoire croisée*), especially on the agents and processes of communication, miscommunication, transmission and brokerage. In the process, the cast list of communities and individuals who created and sustained the three spheres' political cultures, and of those in other world regions, would undoubtedly expand. Integrating more inter-sphere connection and interaction into the picture of political culture we present, particularly if that integration were conducted comparatively and not from the perspective of a single region of western Eurasia, could further disrupt the model of heartland and frontier that has been such a dominant paradigm in much medieval scholarship over the past three decades.⁴⁵ Paradoxically, it might reinforce the idea that, for all its somewhat nebulous qualities, the term 'sphere' captures with some accuracy both the tangible and intangible elements of medieval political culture. We offer this introductory survey to the history of political culture in three spheres in that dual sense of providing some useful tools for learning, teaching and research in the present but also as an incitement to future study.

⁴⁵ R. Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (London, 1993); J. Hudson, 'The making of Europe: a brief summary', in J. Hudson and S. Crumplin (eds), *The Making of Europe: Essays in Honour of Robert Bartlett* (Leiden, 2016), 5–10 at 6.