

ERC Consolidator Grant 2022
Research proposal [Part B1]

Political Authority and Doctrinal Dissent: The Rise of the Confessional State in Late Antiquity

RISE

PI Prof. Dr. Johannes Wienand
HI Technische Universität Braunschweig, Germany
Duration 60 months
Panel SH6
Keywords History, Late Antiquity, Political Authority, Religion, Christianity, Conflict

Proposal Summary

In late antiquity, the Roman state began to take partisan positions in quests for Christian orthodoxy. Such doctrinal commitments rose to become the most versatile, and the most contested, policy device for building and managing politico-religious alliances. Doctrinal commitments were complex governance operations comprising implementation policies and schemes of justification – and despite attempts to confine their operational range, they enforced profound adjustments to the political system, and deeply affected the legitimacy of political authority.

The working hypothesis of RISE is that doctrinal commitments by the state acted as a key catalyst in the socio-cultural realignment processes between antiquity and the middle ages that eventually gave rise to what is best described as confessional governance – a societal system that predicated political legitimacy on religious orthodoxy. Given the enormous importance and far-reaching implications of state partisanship in matters of religious doctrine, it is striking that scholarship has never conceptualized confessional governance in late antiquity nor systematically explored the precise mechanisms of doctrinal commitments, their structural conditions, and their cultural effects.

RISE fills this glaring lacuna in scholarship: Deploying an analytical matrix of interlocked micro-, meso-, and macro-level inquiries, this project investigates for the wider Mediterranean world of the 4th–7th centuries

- how precisely doctrinal commitments operated on the level of political praxeology;
- how they were embedded in the political landscapes of late antiquity more broadly; and
- how and to what extent they contributed to the rise of confessional governance.

Bringing history into fruitful dialogue with religious studies, political theory, and cultural anthropology, RISE provides a powerful theory for explaining a momentous change in world history that left a lasting mark on Eurasian political cultures and still affects our world today.

Section a: Extended synopsis***State of the Art and Objectives******The Scientific Goal: Explaining the Rise of Confessional Governance in Late Antiquity***

When the Roman state began to embrace Christianity in the early fourth century AD, a new instrument entered the toolbox of political authority: *doctrinal commitment*. I speak of doctrinal commitment when the state privileges supporters of a particular religious doctrine over those of competing doctrines. The *working hypothesis* of RISE is that doctrinal commitments made by the state became one of the main catalysts in the socio-cultural realignment processes of the wider Mediterranean world of late antiquity (c. 4th–7th cent.) and eventually led to the rise of what is best described as an early form of *confessional governance* – i.e. politico-religious societal systems in which political authority was regarded as legitimate by the key sectors of society only insofar as being considered in consonance with religious orthodoxy. Various forms of confessional governance dominated the Eurasian political cultures by the end of the period under investigation – yet although this profound reconfiguration of political authority had far-reaching effects on late-antique and early medieval societies, we conspicuously lack a powerful theory of both the rise of confessional governance in late antiquity and of doctrinal commitments as the key trigger and determinant of this world-historical change. RISE sets out to remedy this considerable scholarly shortcoming

Doctrinal commitments have never been properly conceptualized nor systematically analyzed. They are neither the sheer outflow of a ruler's religious convictions, nor a self-evident side effect of religious policy (which are the scholarly default explanations): Rather, doctrinal commitments are complex governance operations in terms of implementation policies, schemes of justification, and measures to confine their operational range. As such, they were first deployed by the Roman state in the reign of emperor Constantine I (306–337 CE), most notably when the state took sides in the 'Donatist controversy' and in the 'Arian controversy'. Conflicts like these over creed or internal organization impaired the formation of a functioning alliance between the state and Christian communities. In the face of such obstacles, the Roman state initially made doctrinal commitments to support the Christian communities in developing and strengthening their internal hierarchical structures, addressing questions of accountability and responsibility in view of building a functioning partnership between the public authorities and Christian representatives. Acceptance of the state-backed doctrinal position thereby turned into a litmus test for willingness to cooperate with the imperial administration.

From this starting point onwards, doctrinal commitments had dramatic repercussions on the politico-religious fabric of Mediterranean cultures at large: With increasing intensity, the developments set in motion by doctrinal commitments embedded the legitimacy of political rule in the wider fields of normativity that standardize religious beliefs, observances, or practices in all essential societal arenas. With large Christian populations, even the Zoroastrian empire of Iran and the early Islamic empires were affected. In the long run, this changed how monarchical rule and imperial power were construed throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond, how the ruling elites in these various political systems were formed, how governance measures were implemented, and how policy decisions were justified. The continuing attempts at integrating into the late-antique political systems religious systems that conditioned religious authority on orthodoxy, while uncoupling it from political authority, led to a new logic of politico-religious conflict, triggered substantive socio-cultural realignment processes, and profoundly reshaped the legitimacy of political authority. The newly emerging texture of what is best described as confessional governance was therefore tightly geared with the cultural foundations of society as such – pertaining to the most elementary anthropological dimensions of human coexistence.

The precise workings of doctrinal commitments and their deep impact on the politico-religious societal system are major blind spots in how we comprehend the history of late antiquity at large. We largely lack a robust understanding of (a) how precisely doctrinal commitments operated on the level of political praxeology; (b) how they were structurally embedded in the political landscapes of late antiquity more broadly; and (c) how and to what extent they contributed to the transformation of political culture between antiquity and the middle ages at large. RISE sets out to answer these decisive questions and to fill the glaring lacuna in scholarship. For the first time, this project will provide a detailed and comprehensive understanding of how the deployment of doctrinal commitments triggered strikingly new dynamics of politico-religious conflict, inducing substantive adjustments to the exercise of political power more broadly, and fostering the rise of confessional governance as a strikingly new form of societal organization.

Deploying a meticulously designed matrix of interlocked analyses on the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels into the workings of doctrinal commitments and their far-reaching cultural effects, RISE aims to make a significant and unique contribution to how we comprehend an era of world-historic transformation in Eurasian societies. Without being incremental, the project builds upon the PI's previous achievements and an existing international academic network, bringing history into a fruitful dialogue with religious studies, political theory, and cultural anthropology. Given the wide interest in the role religion plays in social and political integration, the outcomes will be of interest for various disciplines engaged in the study of politico-religious cultures of the first Millennium and beyond.

Political Authority and Religious Orthodoxy: Current State and Prospects of Conceptualization

Nearly all established approaches to the interplay of political authority and religious orthodoxy in late antiquity are affected by a characteristic tripartite segmentation of historical scholarship: For one scholarly tradition (following A.H.M. JONES) the history of late antiquity equals the administrative history of the Byzantine state; another tradition (in the wake of Peter BROWN) focuses on the social and cultural history of the Mediterranean world; and a third approach (in the footsteps of Garth FOWDEN) is mainly interested in the history of ideas of the first Millennium. All three traditions have undoubtedly earned great merit in fostering our understanding of the late-antique world, but the segmentation of scholarship has also created a significant blind spot regarding the nature of *political authority* in late antiquity. None of the three traditions was able to provide a truly powerful theory of late-antique governance: Neither is political authority solely a question of state institutions and administration, nor can we fully grasp it in social and cultural change, nor can we replace political history with the history of ideas. The matter is further complicated by the long-term repercussions of traditional disciplinary boundaries (between classics, medieval history, church history, Byzantine art and archaeology, Near Eastern Studies, Islamic history).

In Anglo-Saxon, French, and German scholarship, a promising approach to political authority is on the rise with a high potential to overcome these scholarly constraints. Following a decisive suggestion made by Max WEBER in his sociology of political authority ('Herrschaftssoziologie'; WEBER 1922), this research strand conceptualizes political legitimacy as the facticity of acceptance by the ruled (on the applicability of Weber's sociology of political authority to the field of antiquity more generally, see #####). This particular conceptual approach to political authority has so far been applied primarily to Hellenistic kingship (#####; #####; #####; see, however, the critique by Wiemer 2017) and the early Roman monarchy (#####; #####), but first steps have also been taken to investigate certain aspects of the late-antique political systems through the Weberian lens (#####). These investigations clearly show – even if they have so far been confined to specific subfields or individual case studies – that in further pursuing this promising path we can expect a considerable gain in scholarly understanding. RISE proceeds from the presumption that the underlying idea, if properly refined conceptually and applied to the politico-religious transformation in late antiquity, can yield an extremely powerful theory of late-antique governance.

Pursuing a scholarly approach based on the Weberian notion of political authority requires a highly demanding conceptualization, tailored as closely as possible to the socio-cultural specifics of the particular political system under investigation. The pivotal question for any historical investigation of political authority in the Weberian sense is how to get a glimpse of the inner workings of political legitimacy. It may seem paradoxical, but legitimacy can best be studied where it is lost. This is what makes political crises so interesting for historians: In situations of polarization, conflict, and disintegration, our sources reveal with particular clarity the mechanisms designed to integrate a given socio-political system. In view of an investigation that aims at understanding the complex interdependencies between religion and politics in late antiquity, suggestions have consequently been made to focus on phenomena of overt polarization and disintegration – such as outbreaks of religious violence on the one hand, or usurpations, civil wars, and related phenomena of politico-military conflict on the other.

{ the following paragraphs are not yet fully integrated into the argumentative structure of this synopsis }

Scholarship on usurpations, civil wars, and related forms of conflict in late antiquity (including my own extensive research in this field) has repeatedly shown that albeit these phenomena were typically superimposed in various ways with elements of religious discourse, the decisive dynamics that triggered the loss of political legitimacy in such conflicts were mostly *not* initiated by religious determinants (FLAIG 1997; SZIDAT 2010; WIENAND 2011, 2012, 2015; BÖRM/MATTHEIS/WIENAND 2016; GOLDBECK/WIENAND 2017; OMISSI 2018; HAAKE forthcoming). My international academic network project 'Internal War' (German Research Council DFG) in

particular has recently shown that in order to break new ground in identifying and understanding the religious impact on political authority in late antiquity, we need to shift our focus from usurpation and civil war closer to those nodal points where erosions of political legitimacy were genuinely linked to quests for religious orthodoxy. At the same time, approaches to religious violence in late antiquity (for instance, SHAW 2011; HAHN 2015; GADDIS 2005; or the articles by ANDO, CONYBEARE, LENSKI, and DRAKE in *JLA* 6 [2013]) have been forcefully challenged recently on methodological and empirical grounds (most notably by the contributions to DIJKSTRA/RASCHLE 2020, esp. KIPPENBERG 2020, and by VAN NUFFELEN 2020).

Neither research on religious violence on the one hand, nor investigations of usurpations, civil wars, and related phenomena of politico-military conflict on the other can therefore provide an analytical matrix sufficiently comprehensive in theoretical scope and explanatory power for understanding how quests for religious orthodoxy shaped late-antique governance at large.

Most significantly, the question of how religious doctrinal disputes influenced the transformation of governance in late antiquity has not been systematically explored in relation to the concept of political authority (understood as legitimacy of political rule).

A Question of Legitimacy: From Doctrinal Commitments to the Confessional State

Historical scholarship investigates ‘confessionalization’ almost exclusively as an early modern phenomenon. The notion is a leading interpretive category of societal history for analyzing the interdependencies between confession-building and early modern state formation (see REINHARD/SCHILLING 1995; for an overview of the historiographical debate, see LOTZ-HEUMANN 2001, 2013). The *cuius regio eius religio*-principle captures in a powerful formula the political normativity of orthodox belief as the essence of confessional governance. Even though ‘confessionalization’ as we know it is clearly a modern term designed to explain an early modern phenomenon, Hanns Christof BRENNECKE (2015) has shown in principle the high potential of this notion as an analytical tool for exploring the religious impact on governance in late antiquity. If appropriately construed, this avenue will in fact open new horizons. The key lies in how we conceptualize confessional governance in relation to political authority.

Confessional governance is a societal system in which political authority is seen as legitimate by the mainstays of society only insofar as being considered in consonance with religious orthodoxy – confessional governance is thus embedded in wider fields of societal normativity that standardize specific religious beliefs, observances, or practices. The socio-cultural prerequisites that underly early modern confessionalization evolved much earlier and dominated the construction of political authority already at the end of late antiquity (c. 6th/7th centuries) – and even more strikingly: all the essential mechanisms that eventually led to the rise of confessional governance were already in place in the early 4th century AD – the key trigger being *doctrinal commitments* made by the state.

For the state, making a doctrinal commitment typically meant that public authorities proclaimed their support for a particular group among conflicting Christian parties by endorsing that group’s doctrinal position – most commonly, by jointly subscribing to a particular formula of faith that served as a benchmark for inclusion (orthodoxy) and exclusion (heresy, or heterodoxy). As such, doctrinal commitments were complex governance operations that on the level of political praxeology consisted of implementation policies, schemes of justification, and measures to control undesired side effects. I refer to these bundles of operational options as: (a) strategies of implementation, (b) strategies of justification, and (c) strategies of delimitation.

The Roman empire was obviously not a confessional state when in the fourth century public authorities, by making doctrinal commitments, began to intervene in intra-Christian quests for orthodoxy.

- How striking, then, with what rapidity the mechanisms were put in place that allowed the state to intervene in inner-Christian confrontations over questions of creed by taking a partisan position – and how striking the intensity of the repercussions on the political system.
- This can be seen from the very onset: In AD 312, the Roman Emperor Constantine recognized Christianity as a legitimate religion. In North Africa, public authorities were immediately drawn deep into inner-Christian confrontations; when established consensus strategies had failed, the authorities began to take partisan positions in regard to Christian observances, practices, and beliefs. Within a few years of that momentous moment in history, tensions in North Africa spiraled out of control, and when the state ran out of nonviolent options for containing the escalation, the authorities even resorted to military force (see my preliminary reflections on this astonishing development in WIENAND 2016b). The state’s vigorous attempts to enforce

ecclesiastical unity by persecuting dissenters were doomed to failure: North African Christianity remained fraught with doctrinal dissent and violent polarization, the Christian emperor was decried in Christian communities as the Antichrist – and for a whole century, the public authorities repeatedly found themselves in circumstances where they could not maintain public order in the provinces concerned.

- What we see here is the blueprint for a new type of politico-religious conflict that emerged hand in hand with interventions by the state in conflicts over Christian doctrine. Doctrinal partisanship of the imperial authorities was a key driving factor of the astonishing developments in North Africa. For the state, recognizing Christianity as a legitimate religion required a unified hierarchical organization of Christian communities, and this again forced the public authorities to take sides in the inner Christian struggles for orthodoxy. Conventional problem-solving strategies failed, and even the effectiveness of military force was limited – the goal of unity was out of reach. Late antiquity is marked by numerous comparable conflicts in which the state becomes involved in intra-Christian doctrinal disputes without gaining a decisive mechanism to resolve the conflicts.
- The partisan interventions into quests for religious orthodoxy triggered and defined an incessant series of politico-religious conflicts; and the more intensely political authority was geared with religious orthodoxy, the more intensely these conflicts affected the legitimacy of political rule – with far-reaching implications for the entire architecture of the political system: It was no overstatement when Wolf LIEBESCHUETZ said that “the implementation of the decisions of Chalcedon turned large numbers of the inhabitants of its eastern provinces against the imperial government, and thus assisted, and perhaps even made possible, first the Persian, and then the Arab conquest, and the subsequent Islamization of the oriental provinces of the Roman Empire” (LIEBESCHUETZ 2017: 105).
- Based on a rigorous prosopographical analysis, Christoph BEGASS (forthcoming, elaborating on BEGASS 2018) provides important preliminary considerations on the intensifying impact of orthodoxy on the career paths of members of the Roman imperial elite in the fifth and sixth centuries.

RISE will show how the rise of confessional governance (as a societal system that predicates political authority on religious orthodoxy) was a complex transition, characterized by how doctrinal commitments themselves changed their structure, their functionalities, and their impact in a threefold way: (a) the ‘strategies of implementation’ evolved into a core area of policy action for all key societal arenas of the late-antique polities; (b) the ‘strategies of justification’ became a central pillar of political legitimacy; and (c) the ‘strategies of delimitation’ were no longer applied for shielding specific societal arenas from the operational effects of doctrinal commitments.

To be sure, religion and politics were always closely intertwined, and religious policy was an established governing technique long before Christianity was legalized. But in the early fourth century, for the first time in history, a “world-state” (Weisweiler) began to build alliances with adherents of a “universalist religion” (Werblowsky) that construed religious authority independently of political authority – and this novel constellation had considerable consequences for late-antique political culture.

Various structural factors defined the workings and the effects of doctrinal commitments: modifications in the social structure of the Roman army and in the imperial administration; the impact of breakaway empires and divisions of power; the end of the Roman emperor’s active role as military commander and the rise of the *magistri militum*; the novel constellation of a capital-based monarchy; the end of the Roman monarchy in the West and the emergence of post-Roman successor states; the rise of the papal church; the Roman emperor’s return to the battlefield in the seventh century; the end of the Sasanian empire and the rise of Islam.

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Methodology and Project Design

The Methodological Approach: Using Doctrinal Commitments as an Analytical Tool

The conceptual framework outlined above provides the necessary vectors for building an analytical matrix that interlocks *four work packages*: WP 1 for conceptual refinement, and three analytical work packages on the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of inquiry designed to examine and understand the political praxeology of late-antique politico-religious conflicts over questions of doctrinal orthodoxy (= WP 2); their structural conditions within the late-antique socio-political systems more broadly (= WP 3); and their role in the cultural transformation between antiquity and the middle ages at large (= WP 4).

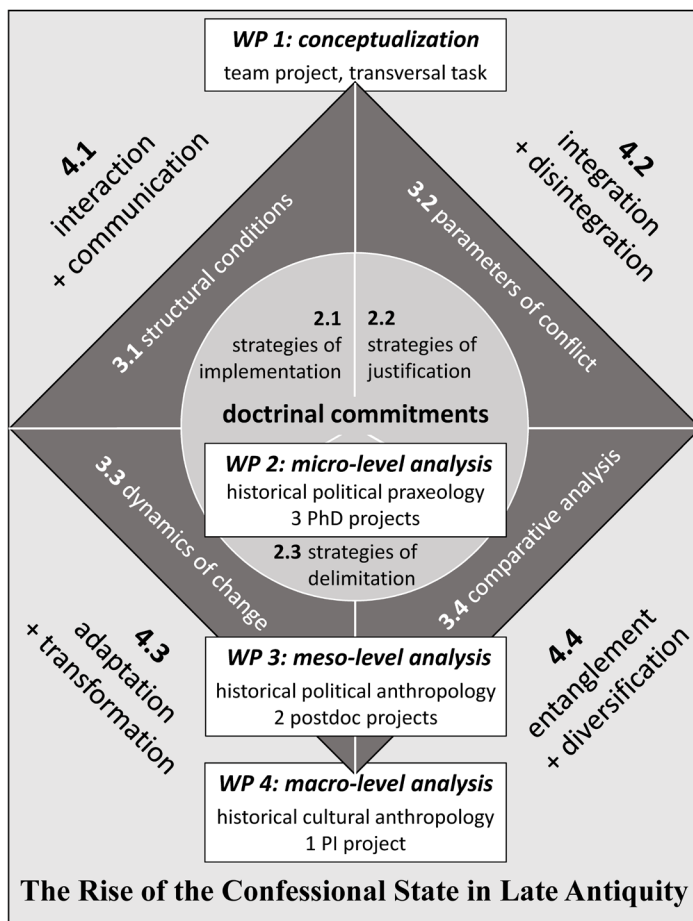


Figure: Work packages (WP 1, WP 2 etc.) and tasks (2.1, 2.2 etc.)

and (2.3) strategies of delimitation. For the first time, the combined analyses into these three bundles of options for policy operations provide a clear understanding of the origins and development, the mechanisms of deployment, the reactions to, and the immediate effects of doctrinal commitments by the late-Roman state.

WP 3: Meso-level analysis (tilted square) – four tasks [two postdoc projects]

On the advanced tier of investigation, *four tasks* pursue interlocked inquiries into four complementary fields of political anthropological analysis, building the conceptual framework for understanding what defined the potential trajectories and impact of doctrinal commitments within their socio-cultural settings of late antiquity more broadly (late-Roman monarchy, post-Roman successor states, Sasanian and early Islamic empires); the first three tasks investigate how doctrinal commitments were defined by (3.1) the structural framework conditions; (3.2) the more specific parameters of conflict escalation and conflict resolution; and (3.3) the factors driving historical change. The fourth task pursues (3.4) systematic comparisons between different late-antique cultural settings. For the first time, these investigations precisely identify and understand the structures, functions, and dynamics that precipitated and conditioned doctrinal commitments and defined their potential reach

This figure represents the project design of RISE.

WP 1: Conceptual refinement (transversal layer) – one task [team project]

The first work package with *one task* is jointly pursued by the entire team, laying the conceptual foundation for RISE. In particular, this task (conducted transversally throughout the entire project runtime) adapts the notion of political authority to the specific historical contexts explored in the three analytical work packages, also examining the implications for how religious violence, intolerance, and confessionalization can be embedded into the theoretical framework of this project.

WP 2: Micro-level analysis (circle) – three tasks [three PhD projects]

The historical inquiry into the political praxeology of doctrinal commitments forms the inner core, i.e. the basic tier of the empirical investigation (groundwork), with *three tasks*, each of which pursues an in-depth probe into one of the three sets of strategies that constitute doctrinal interventions by the late-Roman state in religious quests for orthodoxy. The three interlocked tasks therefore investigate (2.1) strategies of implementation; (2.2) strategies of justification;

and their impact on the late-antique politico-religious systems. The comparative perspective – contrasting the late-Roman state with other cultural contexts such as the post-Roman successor states in the West or the Sasanian and early Islamic empires in the East – will allow us to see more clearly the cultural specifics of how doctrinal commitments were embedded in and affected each particular politico-religious system. These four complementary analyses will also refine the empirical groundwork and methodology of the PhD projects and in conjunction with these build the analytical and conceptual pillars for the overarching synthesis to be developed by the PI.

WP 4: Macro-level analysis (outer rectangle) – four tasks [PI project]

The uppermost tier of investigation is the synthesizing dimension of RISE: Building upon the empirical groundwork conducted by the PhD students and the more advanced structural and conceptual insights gained by the postdocs, this top-level investigation establishes an overall understanding of the rise of confessional governance within the wider contexts of socio-cultural transformation processes between antiquity and the Eurasian middle ages. This layer of historical inquiry encompasses *four tasks* relating to the four fundamental dimensions of cultural anthropological analysis into the structural parameters and historical dynamics of (4.1) modes of human interaction and communication; (4.2) processes of societal integration and disintegration; (4.3) dynamics of socio-political adaptation and transformation; and (4.4) conditions and effects of cultural entanglement and diversification. These four dimensions are interconnected with and superimposed on the four complementary fields of inquiry explored by the postdocs. The overarching tier of understanding ties the rise of the confessional state to the impact doctrinal commitments had on the legitimacy of political authority: This uppermost level of investigation will show – for the first time – how the introduction and deployment of doctrinal commitments as a political tool eventually geared political authority with religious orthodoxy and thus played a decisive role in the profound reconfiguration of politico-religious cultures in late antiquity at large – a substantial transformation with considerable long-term effects on the history of human coexistence.

Outcomes and Impact: From Aspirational Goal to New Horizons

RISE yields a novel understanding of late-antique political culture. The outcomes will be published in a number of scholarly monographs, two conference proceedings, one theory-oriented companion, and a string of papers or book chapters in leading anthologies and journals. Three international conferences and four workshops firmly place the project in the global scholarly contexts; additional measures – research residences, conference participation, ‘critical friends’, and visiting scholars – strengthen our support network and scientific quality management system.

RISE establishes a powerful theory for explaining a momentous change in world history. For the first time, RISE provides a detailed and comprehensive understanding of exactly how and why doctrinal commitments by the state began and continued to shape the construction of political authority in late antiquity and how these commitments brought about a profound reconfiguration of the socio-political system that can best be described as the rise of an early form of the confessional state. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, RISE thereby reconsiders – in both empirical and conceptual ways – common understandings of the historical transformation processes between antiquity and the middle ages. The project is groundbreaking in that it resolves a major blind spot in scholarly comprehension of precisely how specific new dynamics of politico-religious conflict and conflict resolution emerged in late antiquity, how they brought about a novel form of governance, and how they left a lasting mark on Eurasian political cultures that still affects our world today.