

CROSS ROADS

**TRAVELLING
THROUGH THE
MIDDLE AGES**

W BOOKS

This joint publication by the Allard Pierson Museum Amsterdam and its partners in the CEMEC project (Connecting Early-Medieval European Collections), with the museum partners of the COBBRA Museum Consortium, is published alongside the exhibition *Crossroads. Travelling through the Middle Ages* at the Allard Pierson Museum (15 September 2017 to 11 February 2018), the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens and the LVR-LandesMuseum in Bonn.

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The exhibition *Crossroads. Travelling through the Middle Ages* was sponsored by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union (Creative Europe, EACEA Agency), the Mondriaan Fund, the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, and the Friends of the Allard Pierson Museum.

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 **BOOKS**

**TRAVELLING
THROUGH THE
MIDDLE AGES,
AD 300–1000**

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PREFACE

< MEDIEVAL WORLD MAP

Map from a 12th-century manuscript of the *Etymologies* by Isidore of Seville (c. AD 560–636; see p. 167). The world is represented

as a circle divided into three continents by a T-shaped sea: Asia, Europe, and Africa.

The international *Crossroads* project connects European cultural heritage as it emerged between AD 300 and 1000. In this project, different narrative contexts are explored in terms of continuity, change and entanglement, taking into consideration the effects of the converging pagan and Christian influences as the transition was made into a predominantly Christian society which transformed the Early Middle Ages. The exhibition is presented through specially selected museum objects, displayed thematically, and different media such as an interactive interpretative mapping tool, the cross-culture timeline.

Never before were so many people adrift in and around Europe as in our time. On the other hand, migrations, climate change, emerging religious communities and shifting markets were in fact well-known phenomena between 300 and 1000. We should not romanticise these past developments, but looking at the past can help us put our own challenges in perspective or incite us to open up to the different perspectives that we can distinguish. Which brings us to the core of this project: diversity and connectivity.

Both in this publication and in the *Crossroads* exhibition, the different regional identities and their development over time and space come to the fore. Early-medieval society was diverse, multilayered and constantly changing — a complex world full of energy and ambition. We see people looking for support or safety, for trading contacts, expertise or knowledge, and for fortune or booty. In one way or another, people were connected.

The stories of the travellers in this book illustrate the connectivity of the Early Middle Ages. These travellers in a way embody the curiosity that is the driving force of our museums, collections, visitors and staff. Travelling in place and time shows us diverse societies and hopefully keeps us curious about the other(s).

This major European exhibition is part of the Connecting Early-Medieval European Collections (CEMEC) project, which was funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union (Creative Europe, EACEA Agency). We want to thank the lenders of this exhibition, all the partners in this project, the authors of this publication, and the members of the Editorial Board for their support and input, which the exhibition team and the designers have shaped into an evocative exhibition and publication. Through our cooperation and with their support we can show a new perspective on a part of European history. It is our hope that the power of diversity and connectivity, the two themes of both the exhibition and this publication, will provide the diverse perspectives that are a means to grow respect and strive for peace.

This publication is volume 7 in the Allard Pierson Museum Series, which is published in cooperation with WBOOKS. *Crossroads* has been realised with help from the Mondriaan Fund, the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds and the Friends of the Allard Pierson Museum.

Crossroads is also the second result of a collaboration between a number of European museums sharing the same DNA. The partners in the COBBRA network (in Copenhagen, Oxford, Bonn, Brussels, and Amsterdam) will keep working together, exchanging expertise, colleagues and collections, and organising travelling exhibitions to show our respect for the ancient and medieval world as well as its relevance for our own.

Wim Hupperetz
Director Allard Pierson Museum

CROSSROADS

TRAVELLING THROUGH EUROPE, AD 300–1000

Wim Hupperetz, Lynda Mulvin
and Michael Schmauder

This publication presents the Early Middle Ages as a period of transformation when cultural exchange was reflected in the development of different regional cultures in Europe from Ireland to the Mediterranean, from the Baltic to Greece and Spain. The overarching themes of connectivity and diversity give shape to individual elements such as the heritage of the ancient Roman Empire, the effects of travel and the impact of war, the representation of identity and the connection of knowledge and faith as Jewish, Christian and Muslim groups coexisted, reflecting the cohesive nature of Europe in the Early Middle Ages.

From the fourth to the eighth century, external forces caused a reshaping of the Roman Empire. Most significantly the Huns appeared out of the east, causing great social upheaval. Germans were on the move as well, entering the Roman Empire from the west and playing an important role in the empire's internal conflicts, which caused destabilisation for decades. This migration reconfigured the old West Roman Empire and created a frightening momentum with successive waves of horsemen from the east rolling in. Between 636 and 642 the East Roman or Byzantine Empire lost its most productive and fertile provinces — Egypt, Syria, and Palestine — to the Arab armies. It was the start of a spectacular westward advance of Islam that was blocked at both ends of Europe: by the Franks in Poitiers and by the Byzantines in Constantinople. In the North we see that around the North Sea and Baltic Sea trading networks began



MUDEJAR STYLE

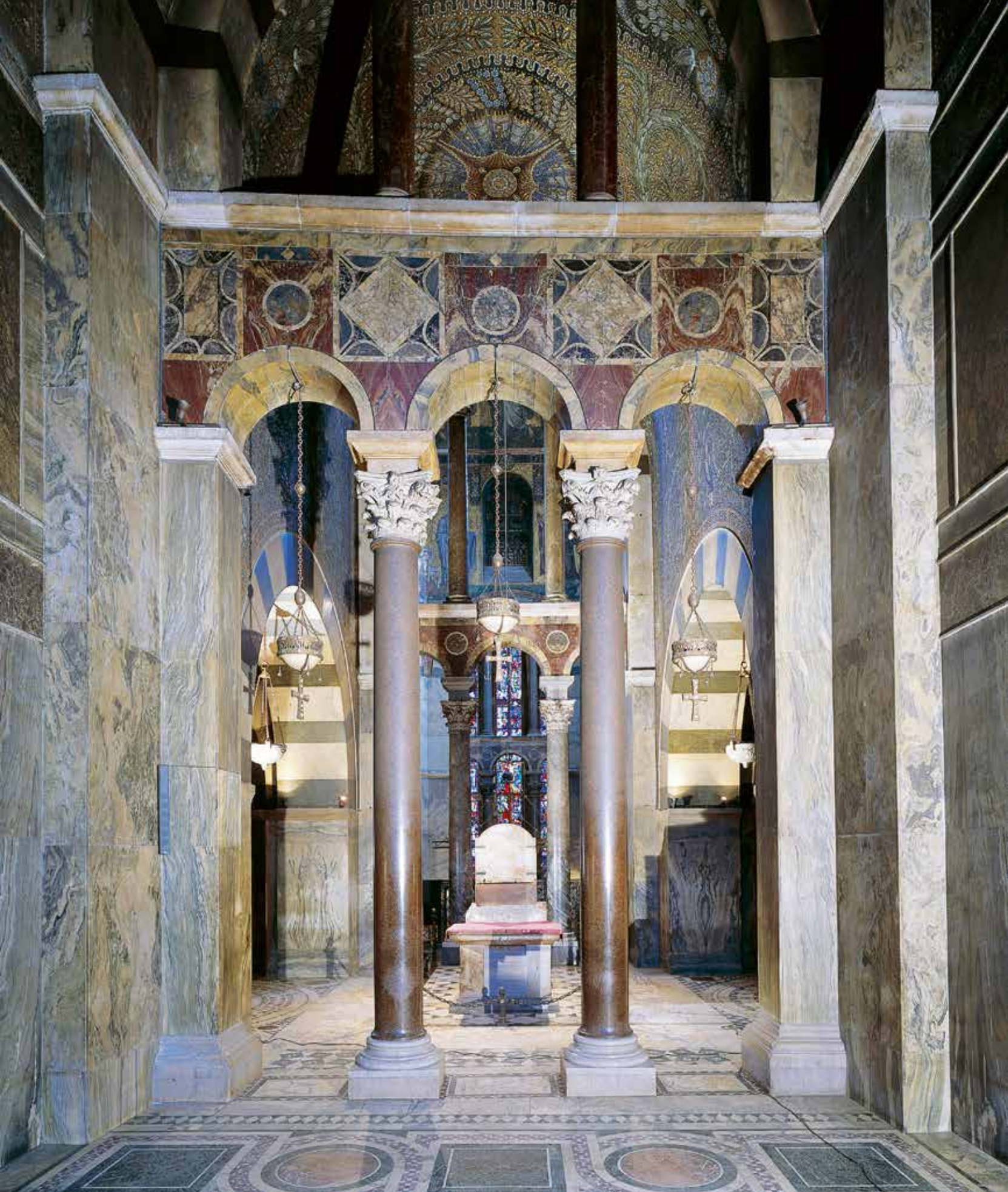
Following the Umayyad conquest of Hispania, al-Andalus became one of the leading cultural and economic centres in Europe, the Mediterranean and the Islamic world. The Real Alcázar (Royal Palace) in Seville, Spain, was built as a fort by Abd al-Rahman III in 913, on the site of former Roman and Visigoth forts, and was later

developed as a palace in the 11th–13th centuries. It was built in the so-called *mudejar* style, a combination of Arab and European architecture, and is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Green marble column with Corinthian capital from the Roman period, in the main courtyard of the Real Alcázar at Seville.

SPOLIA >

The Palatine Chapel in Aachen was built by Charlemagne between 796 and 805, after the model of contemporary Byzantine buildings. The original Carolingian throne came from the *spolia* (spoils of war) of the Church of the Holy Sepul-

chre in Jerusalem. The upper-gallery openings are divided by ancient Roman columns that had earlier been reused in a church in Cologne. Charlemagne had further *spolia* brought to Aachen from Rome and Ravenna.





SYNCRETISM

In Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, rituals and symbols from various religions were freely combined into new forms that we often find surprising. Sometimes this syncretism was a conscious effort, but usually it grew organically from

daily practice, and worshippers rarely had problems with it. Coptic textile with the Christogram XP ('Chr' in Greek) inside an Egyptian *ankh* (symbol of life). Linen and wool with purple dye, 22 x 19 cm, 4th–5th cent. AD, Egypt.

full Christian society which transformed the Early Middle Ages. The exhibition is presented through different media of specially selected museum objects exhibited thematically, combined with a mapping of the objects on a digital panoramic timeline as an interactive interpretative tool.

As a general rule the Roman Empire is synonymous with the homogeneous Graeco-Roman culture which was characterised by distinct administrative structures, a highly developed infrastructure, and with Latin as the official language that was spoken all over the Empire as a connective element across this vast landscape. This is

to re-establish from the sixth century onward and many centralised markets emerged. Exotic items were traveling all over Europe, reflecting the amazingly wide exchange networks.

In the ninth and tenth century Europe was rebalanced in several ways. This period showed a turmoil of migrations and ended with a patchwork of polities that led to an era of state formation in western Europe. The concept of the Early Middle Ages is of course a Western European concept that does not reflect the eastern part of the Roman Empire, which continued to flourish and showed a remarkable resilience that deeply influenced European history.

With the archaeological evidence and material culture of this period we try to envisage the intriguing and sometimes astonishing recovery of societies and communities in an age of change. The *Crossroads* exhibition, which will travel to other cities in Europe as well, explores different narrative contexts relating to aspects of continuity, change and entanglement, taking into consideration the effects of the converging pagan and Christian influences, as the transition was made to a



LONG-DISTANCE TRADE

This necklace, found in Meckenheim (Germany), testifies to long-distance trade. Interspersed between the glass beads are amber beads from the Baltic and a bead from the shell of a thorny oyster (*Spondylus gaederopus*)

from the Aegean. Thorny oysters were traded in Europe as early as the Late Neolithic (c.4500 BC). Glass, amber, copper alloy, thorny oyster, Meckenheim (Germany), AD 550–650.



THE BLUE QUR'AN

The 'Blue Qur'an' is one of the most famous works of Islamic calligraphy, dating from the late 9th or early 10th century. It is written in gold and decorated in silver on *vellum* (calfskin parchment) coloured with indigo, probably emulating the purple parchment used for Byzantine imperial manuscripts. In the 7th century, much of the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East was conquered by Arab armies that followed the trade and communication routes.



totally different from the standard image of the Early Middle Ages, the so-called Dark Ages. Was it really so dark? This is one of the key questions in the exhibition *Crossroads: Travelling through Europe, AD 300–1000*. It also asks questions regarding aspects of diversity and regionalism, and whether there were connecting elements during this period and if so, what impact they had. The unifying content has been identified in the form of ten exemplary travellers who migrated and moved around Europe, such as Ohthere, who gave a matter-of-fact account of his travels to the North Cape, the Kola Peninsula and Ireland; Theophano, the Byzantine princess who came to the West to marry an Ottonian

MIGRATION

The Early Middle Ages are a period of migration. The Longobards were on the move through Europe over several centuries. The Huns appeared in Europe in the first half of the 5th century, followed by the Avars c. 555. The Avars drove the Longobards to Italy and extorted tribute from the Byzantine Empire. In 626

they made an alliance with the Sassanids and attacked Constantinople; having failed to take the city, the Avars lost their dominant position and became a mere regional power. Gold short-stemmed cup from an Avar male grave found in Bócsa (Hungary), h. 16.7 cm, AD 625–650.



HARUN AL-RASHID'S HOMAGE TO CHARLEMAGNE

Although the two rulers never met, they did exchange envoys and gifts. There are reports of three embassies from Charlemagne to the Baghdad court, and vice versa Harun al-Rashid sent at least two embassies to the Frankish Empire. An alliance between the two superpowers suited them in their conflicts with the Byzantine Empire and the Umayyad Caliphate, which was now ruled from Cordoba in Spain. The painting, a draft for a series of tapestries on the reign of Charles V (r. 1519–1558), consciously accentuates the Eastern envoys' show of respect for his predecessor. Abul-Abbas is not in the painting because he was brought to Aachen by Charlemagne's own envoy Isaac. Painting by Jacob Jordaens, 1663. Oil on canvas, 78 x 65.5 cm.

TRAVELLER

ABUL-ABBAS CHARLEMAGNE'S ELEPHANT

Robin Oomkes

Animals from history rarely have an entire biography dedicated to them, but Abul-Abbas the elephant is an exception (see 'Further Reading'). The famous Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809) gave him to Charlemagne (r. 774–814) as a present. It hardly matters that the animal's biography is incomplete (there is no indication as to where and when he was born, for instance): that information is not available for many a medieval

prince either. What we do know about Abul-Abbas comes from two sources: the Carolingian state annals (*Annales regni Francorum*) and Charlemagne's biography, *Vita Karoli Magni*, by his contemporary Einhard. The elephant is not mentioned in Abbasid sources, but because of the many references in the annals we can be certain that the beast existed—which makes him the first documented elephant north of the Alps since Hannibal. Incidentally, the scanty

sources have not prevented even professionals from making up additional details. An exhibition held at Aachen in 2010 was entitled *Ex Oriente: Isaac and the White Elephant*, while the animal's colour is in fact unknown. Abul-Abbas was a diplomatic present. Rulers exchanged such gifts as tokens of goodwill, but also as a kind of one-upmanship: offering a unique or precious gift also meant showing off one's own power and wealth. Those in power have always looked for objects, preferably from their own country or sphere of influence, that could serve as unique gifts. The Dutch Republic from the seventeenth century onward used porcelain that the VOC (the Dutch East India Company) brought from China; Prussian princes gave amber from the Baltic; the king of Saxony, who had nothing special to offer, had an alchemist locked

up in Meissen until he discovered the formula for making porcelain. But Harun al-Rashid, famous from *The Thousand and One Nights*, outshone all his peers in originality and magnificence. Apart from Abul-Abbas, he gave his powerful European colleague a working clock that sounded the hours, giving the imperial court reason to believe it was bewitched. On the one hand these gifts confirmed the caliph's power, while on the other hand they showed his respect for the recipient. From the caliph's court at Baghdad, the elephant and its handler—a Frankish Jew named Isaac—travelled west to the Mediterranean and along its south coast, through Egypt and Libya to what is now Algeria and Tunisia. Charlemagne had been warned by messenger that the elephant was on its way and sent a fleet to Carthage to pick it up. Isaac and Abul-Abbas arrived in the vicinity of Genoa in October 801. They spent the winter at Vercelli, south of the Lago Maggiore, crossed the Alps in spring, and arrived at the Aachen imperial residence on 20 July 802. The long detour south of the Mediterranean (the logical route from Baghdad to Aachen is through Turkey) was made inevitable by the hostile relations between Harun al-Rashid and the Byzantine empress Irene, who controlled what is now Turkey. It appears that Charlemagne was delighted with his walking present. He sometimes took it with him on military expeditions and also used Abul-Abbas as a kind of Air Force One—a status symbol that often accompanied him on his travels from residence to residence, enhancing the impression of imperial power.



An expedition against the Vikings proved fatal to the unfortunate elephant. In 810, probably while crossing the Rhine, it caught pneumonia and died, again according to the state annals, at Lippeham (which probably lay near present-day Wesel on the Lower Rhine). Charlemagne's elephant has stirred people's imaginations ever since.



ELEPHANT

Bread stamp depicting an elephant and its driver, diam. 18.5 cm, Egypt, 'Coptic', 4th–5th cent. AD. The sight of an elephant, the first documented specimen north of the Alps since Hannibal's days some 1000 years earlier, must have been awe-inspiring to all who encountered it.

When farmers discovered some enormous bones near Wesel in the eighteenth century, scholars from the region immediately attributed them to Abul-Abbas. The bones may in fact very well have belonged to a prehistoric mammoth—but in any case, the story is too good to leave out.

THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS

'Under the Sky with Music and Flowers', illustration from *The Thousand and One Nights*, 1895 (colour engraving). Under Harun al-Rashid Baghdad flourished as a centre of arts and sciences, but in the West the image of luxury and decadence prevails that cultural critic Edward Said (1935–2003) has called Orientalism. His theory is that ever since the Greek playwright Aeschylus' *The Persians* (472 BC) Europe has painted a cliché picture of the Middle East as mysterious, decadent and perverse. Thus Harun al-Rashid is mostly known in the West as the caliph from *The Thousand and One Nights*, the Indian-Persian-Arab frame story in which Scheherazade tells the sultan a story with a cliff-hanger every night to escape execution.



LATE ANTIQUE EGYPT

Tineke Rooijackers

Egypt was — and still is — a country defined by its geography. Known for its bountiful harvests, its very existence was determined by the great river of the Nile, and life was structured around its cycle of inundation. Farming was restricted to the Nile Valley, the Delta, and the Fayum Basin, which was watered by a channel. There was little occupation in the inhospitable mountainous deserts to the east and west, except in the oases. This unique environment is also the reason why we know so much about Egyptian civilisation today. The hot and dry desert sands ensured the preservation of organic materials such as wood, textiles and, perhaps most importantly, papyrus. From short notes on pot shards (*ostraka*) to Bible manuscripts, the large numbers of extant texts provide a window on Late Antique Egyptian society. In the fourth century AD, Egypt was a province of the Roman Empire and very much a part of the greater Hellenised East. Its culture was characterised by a mixture of mainly Greek and Egyptian elements, within which a distinct form of Christianity would develop. Egypt's capital Alexandria was the hub of the eastern Mediterranean, surpassed only by Constantinople. It was home to

PRAYING WOMAN

Clay figurines of women were common in Late Antique Egypt. They often show a woman with her hands held high in prayer. Most have piercings in the ears that would have accommodated metal earrings, and elaborate hairstyles. In many cases the women have big

bellies; they were probably associated with fertility and childbirth. Many were found with their heads broken off, suggesting that they were deliberately broken as part of a ritual. Terracotta, h. 18.7 cm, 4th cent. AD.

large numbers of Greek settlers as well as many immigrants from the eastern Mediterranean, including a substantial Jewish community. This vibrant cosmopolitan city was also an internationally renowned centre of culture and learning. In the early Christian era, the famous Catechetical School of Alexandria fostered influential theologians such as Pantaenus (d. c.200), Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215), and Origen (184/5–253/4), who infused Christian theology with Greek philosophical reasoning.

The main languages used in Egypt were Greek and Egyptian, and to a lesser extent Latin by the Roman administration. Coptic was developed in the third century as a new way to write Egyptian after the Demotic script (a cursive and abbreviated form of Egyptian writing) had largely fallen out of use in the first century. Based on the Greek alphabet and rich in Greek vocabulary, it was mainly used in Christian contexts at first and only became more generally employed from the sixth century onward. The term 'Coptic' is also used to describe the period or material culture from the first Christians until the Arab conquest, although this is anachronistic. The term is based on the Arabic *qibt*, which again is a bastardisation of the Greek 'Aigypotos', and was used by the Arabs to describe the inhabitants of Egypt. Because most native Egyptians were Christian, it later became associated with Egyptian Christians specifically.

EGYPT IN THE MEDITERRANEAN TRADE NETWORK

Like Rome before it, Constantinople was dependent on Egyptian wheat, shipped across the choppy Mediterranean Sea, to feed its hungry urban multitudes. This was, however, far from the only export product. The *Edict of Maximum Prices*, issued by the Emperor Diocletian (r. 284–305) in 301, mentions for example Alexandrine glass (which generally fetched a higher price than any other type), writing reeds, linen, opium from Thebes, and different types of stone such as porphyry, red granite from Syene (Aswan), and grey granite from Mons Claudianus. Other coveted Egyptian wares included ivory carvings, jewellery, and of course papyrus, on which it virtually had a monopoly. Goods were also imported into Egypt, such as fine pottery, wine and olive oil, which was hardly produced locally.

Alexandria did not owe its dominance in the trade network of the Mediterranean solely to the beauty of its harbours and its large fleet, as the first-century Greek author Dio Chrysostom put it, but also to its position

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Caption to p. 202

HORUS ON HORSEBACK

This exceptional window fragment shows the Egyptian god Horus in the dress of a Roman cavalryman killing the evil god Setekh in the guise of a crocodile. As Egyptian deities traditionally were never portrayed on horseback, this scene reflects the influence of Graeco-Roman models. Terracotta, h. 46.1 cm, 4th cent. AD.

COLOPHON

Publisher

WBOOKS, Zwolle
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www.wbooks.com
In collaboration with
Allard Pierson Museum
Amsterdam
www.allardpiersonmuseum.nl

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www.noctua-text-translation.eu

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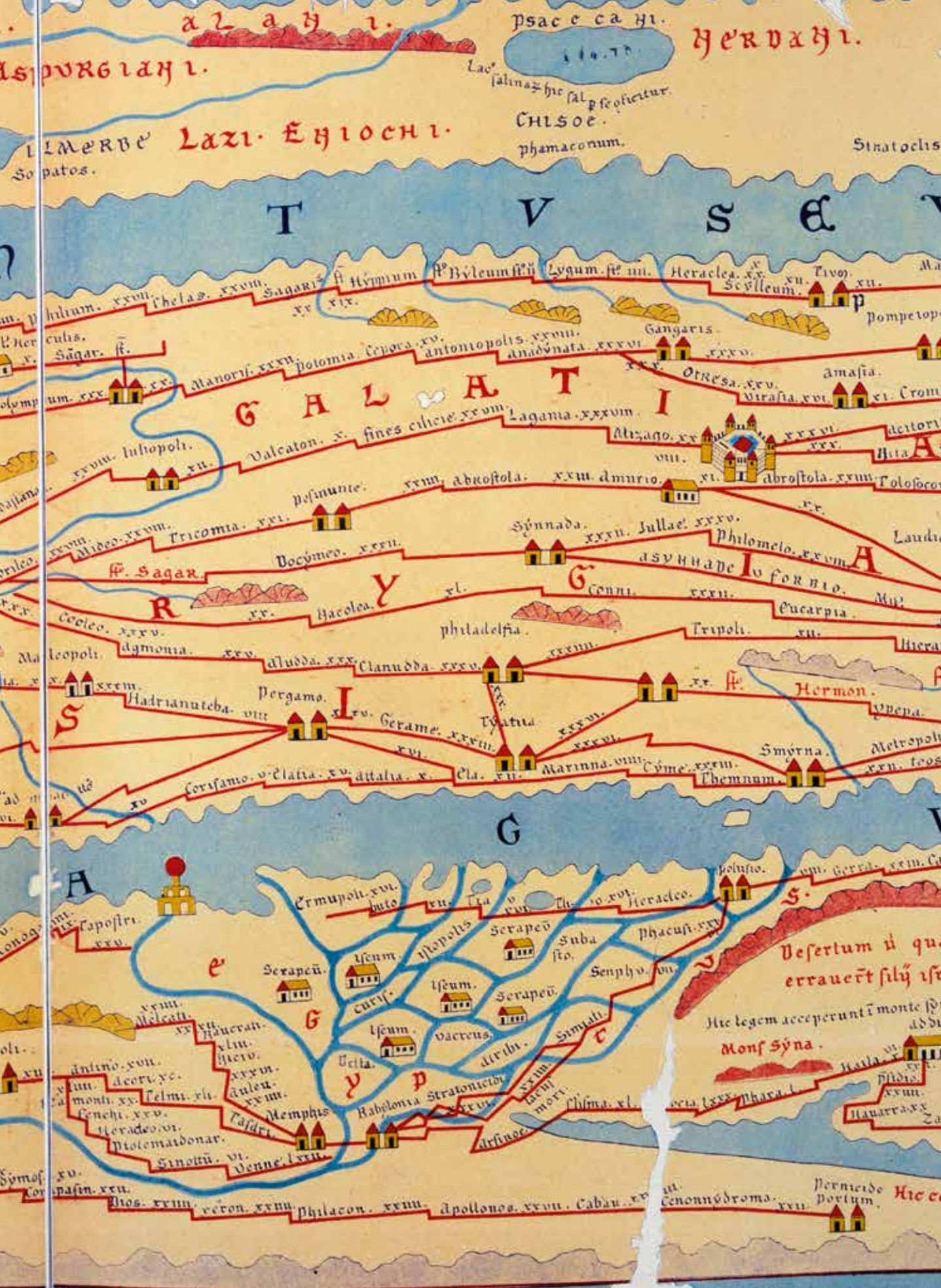
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www.extrablond.nl

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ISBN 978 94 625 8224 8 (English)
ISBN 978 94 625 8223 1 (Nederlands)

This is volume 7 in the Allard Pierson Museum Series. Previous titles on the Etruscans, Egypt, Rome, Troy, the Crimea, and Sicily.

 **WBOOKS**

 **ALLARD PIERSON MUSEUM**



A runic graffito in the Hagia Sophia, a gilt Byzantine helmet in the grave of a Frankish nobleman, a treasure hidden from the Vikings in the Low Countries containing an Arab *dirham*: these are just a few examples of the telling early-medieval finds in this book. Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages are often viewed as a time of decline, chaos, invasions and war. But there is another side to this period as well. There was a rich diversity of cultures in Europe — from Longobards and Merovingians to Byzantines and Avars — and a lively exchange of goods and ideas, sometimes over great distances. The Vikings set up a trade network that reached to Baghdad; the Silk Road brought commodities to Europe, but

also diplomatic missions, knowledge and ideas. This is illustrated by the interludes in this book, the stories of ten travellers: pilgrims, scholars, diplomats, and an elephant.

Despite the numerous conflicts, the period from 300 to 1000 AD was also one of growth, continuity and peaceful coexistence. From the late eighteenth century a romantic view of the Middle Ages arose, resulting in the Gothic Revival and the art of the Pre-Raphaelites. Nation states today happily refer to the heroism of the Early Middle Ages, when kingdoms were born and present-day Europe began to take shape.

