

# CONVIVIUM

Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval  
Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean  
*Seminarium Kondakovianum, Series Nova*



UNIVERSITÉ DE LAUSANNE  
• ACADEMY OF SCIENCES OF  
THE CZECH REPUBLIC • MASARYK  
UNIVERSITY •

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Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean

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# **A Radical Turn?**

Reappropriation,  
Fragmentation,  
and Variety in the  
Postclassical World  
(3rd–8th Centuries)

edited by **Ivan Foletti**, **Marie Okáčová**  
& **Adrien Palladino**

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# A Radical Turn?

## “Late Antique” Anxiety, Rupture, and Creative Continuity

Ivan Foletti, Marie Okáčová & Adrien Palladino

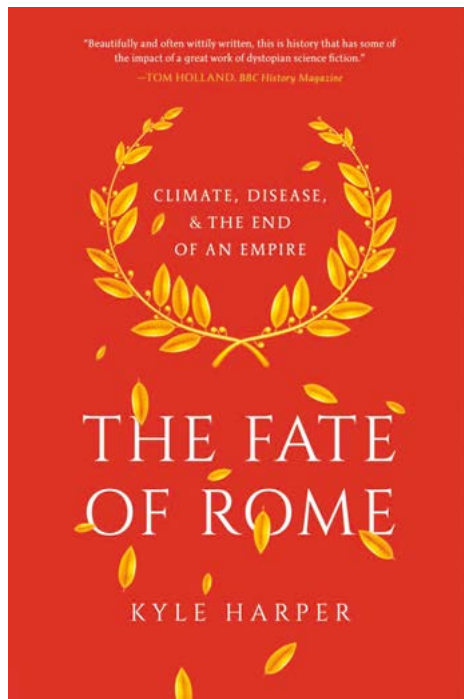
Shortly after the end of the 1914–1918 war, the German artist Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) began producing a series of works he called *Merz* – a word coined to designate a group of collages conceived as assemblages of waste and garbage. Though other artists had already employed the technique of collage, Schwitters was one of the first to systematically incorporate residue collected in the streets of his native Hanover, which conferred his works, composed of old bills, newspaper clippings, driftwood, wheel parts, and other trash, with a particularly intimate and “popular” dimension<sup>1</sup>. In his *Sternenbild*, words such as *Hunger*, *blutig*, *korrupt*, and *Reichstag* clearly embodied the acute anxiety of interwar Germany [Fig. 1], torn into a “fragmentary” state of being:

“During the war, things were in terrible turmoil. What I had learned at the academy was of no use to me, and useful new ideas were not yet ready [...]. Everything had collapsed, and new things had to be made from the fragments<sup>2</sup>.”

1/ Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbild 25A. Das Sternenbild*, 1920, oil, string, wood, sheet metal, grid, and paper on cardboard, 104.5 × 79 cm / Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (Düsseldorf)

1 Graham Bader, *Poisoned Abstraction: Kurt Schwitters between Revolution and Exile*, New Haven / London 2021.

2 “Im Krieg waren die Dinge in schrecklichem Aufruhr. Was ich auf der Akademie gelernt hatte, nützte mir nichts, und die nützlichen neuen Ideen waren noch nicht fertig [...]. Alles war zusammengebrochen und aus den Bruchstücken musste Neues gemacht werden” (Kurt Schwitters, *Das literarische Werk*, Friedhelm Lach ed., vol. V, Cologne 1981, p. 355). Unless indicated otherwise, translations are by the authors of the present text.



2/ Cover of Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*, Princeton/Oxford 2017

For the artist, the symbolic reuse of such fragments became a way of “materializing” his relationship with the past in the aftermath of the trauma of World War I. A fragment – a piece of a no-longer-existing reality – thus becomes a means of making sense of the past within an uncertain present and future, a means of selecting which elements of the past are to be remembered. The shock that followed the 1914–1918 war can hardly be compared to the gradual transformation of the “late antique” world, even if some of the events of this period – such as the sack of Rome by the troops of Alaric in 410 – must have had a similar impact on the collective psychology of late Roman society<sup>3</sup>, arousing fears and anxieties about an uncertain future<sup>4</sup>. It is therefore not surprising that the idea of fragmentation as a prerequisite for the creative “reconstruction” of the world has been variously endorsed by past scholarship to conceptualize the period under examination and its literary, visual, and material cultures.

Anxiety, continuity, and rupture, alongside the creative possibilities they brought along, were the themes broadly discussed by the scholars from different fields (art history, archaeology, classical philology, and theology) at the conference *A Radical Turn? Subversions, Conversions, and Mutations in the Postclassical World (3<sup>rd</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> c.)*, organized at Masaryk University in Brno from October 18 to 19, 2021, from which this volume emerges. In the midst of a global pandemic, this event, held in person with speakers coming from across Europe, was a great occasion to reflect on how we tend to project the present onto the past. In 2017, Kyle Harper published a much-discussed volume on the causal relationship between climatic changes, epidemics, and the collapse of the Roman world [Fig. 2]<sup>5</sup>. In 2020, he proposed seeing the coronavirus pandemic as a breaking point – a radical turn – for the present<sup>6</sup>. That same year, Mischa Meier showed how the comparison between historical pandemics and the Covid-19 pandemic is a natural line of thinking for historians: “From now on, an entire generation of historians will frame the Justinian Plague, the ‘Black Death’, and, of course, the Spanish Flu against the background of Covid-19. One will be able to reflect on this fact, but one cannot escape it<sup>7</sup>.” While we are convinced

that comparing the Covid-19 pandemic with the ones evoked by Meier is ahistorical and problematic in epidemiological terms – e.g. the mortality cannot be compared –, the psychological impacts of the events may follow a very similar mechanism. Thus, the topic of the conference – questioning the radicality of the transformations of the late antique world – happened to mirror contemporary concerns and anxieties. Since the conference, the global situation has evolved even more dramatically. We are facing a clash between the “Euro-Atlantic” vision of the world and one promoted by Russia, but more broadly by major Asian players, including China. The consequences of this confrontation, embodied in the dramatic events of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (as well as the “hidden” invasion of Armenia by Azerbaijan, largely ignored by the “Western media”, and the Chinese menacing of Taiwan), are threatening the stability and balance of the globalized world. In light of these events, we could perhaps ask ourselves – however banal it may seem – if we are, indeed, experiencing an “age of anxiety” like the one generally framed, as proposed by Eric R. Dodds, by the notion of the late antique<sup>8</sup>.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of the extent to which Late Antiquity was indeed a period of crisis, it is undoubtable that its historiographical reception “reconstructed” this period as a cultural breaking point *par excellence* – a “threshold period” and a moment of intense reconfiguration of the world<sup>9</sup>. Notions such as disintegration and fragmentation and also reappropriation and creative variety have expressed and shaped our understanding of the period across centuries and research fields. This is precisely what we would like to focus on in the present introduction, moving from epistemology to visual and literary cultures with the concept of fragmentation as our guide on the journey. If such an introduction is, we believe, useful for a better understanding of the volume’s coherence, it of course by no means has the ambition to be exhaustive, focusing mainly on several breaking points in the understanding of the late antique in the past two centuries.

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- 3 See *The Sack of Rome in 410 AD: The Event, Its Context and Its Impact*, Proceedings of the Conference (German Archaeological Institute at Rome, November 4–6, 2010), Johannes Lipps, Carlos Machado, Philipp von Rummel eds, Wiesbaden 2013.
- 4 See the review-article by Peter Van Nuffelen, “Not Much Happened: 410 and All That”, *The Journal of Roman Studies*, CV (2015), pp. 322–329.
- 5 Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*, Princeton/Oxford 2017.
- 6 *Idem*, “The Coronavirus Is Accelerating History Past the Breaking Point”, *Foreign Policy Magazine* (April 6, 2020), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/06/coronavirus-is-accelerating-history-past-the-breaking-point/> [last accessed on 17 October 2022].
- 7 “Eine ganze Historikergeneration wird von nun an die Justinianische Pest, den ‘Schwarzen Tod’ und selbstverständlich auch die Spanische Grippe vor dem Hintergrund von Covid-19 framen. Man wird über diesen Sachverhalt reflektieren können, aber man wird ihm nicht entkommen” (Mischa Meier, “Die Justinianische Pest – im Spiegel der Covid-19-Pandemie betrachtet”, in *H-Soz-Kult* [2020/11/27], [www.hsozkult.de/debate/id/diskussionen-5077](http://www.hsozkult.de/debate/id/diskussionen-5077) [last accessed on 17 October 2022]). See also *Idem*, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians. Kontingenzerfahrung und Kontingenzbewältigung im 6. Jh. n. Chr.*, Göttingen 2003.
- 8 Eric R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine*, Cambridge 1965.
- 9 See already Alexander Demandt, *Der Fall Roms. Die Auflösung des römischen Reiches im Urteil der Nachwelt*, Munich 2014 [1984]. The literature on the historiography of Late Antiquity has been growing exponentially in recent years; see, e.g., *The New Late Antiquity: A Gallery of Intellectual Portraits*, Clifford Ando, Marco Formisano eds, Heidelberg 2021; Arnaldo Marcone, *Tarda antichità. Profile storico e prospettive storiografiche*, Rome 2020; Mario Mazza, “‘Spätantike’. Da Burckhardt a Usener e Reitzenstein – e oltre”, *Rivista di Diritto Romano*, XIX (2019), pp. 149–165; Richard Brilliant, “‘Late Antiquity’: A Protean Term”, *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia*, xxv (2012), pp. 29–56; Edward James, “The Rise and Function of the Concept ‘Late Antiquity’”, *Journal of Late Antiquity*, I/1 (2008), pp. 20–30; Polymnia Athanassiadi, “Antiquité tardive. Construction et déconstruction d’un modèle historiographique”, *Antiquité Tardive*, xiv (2006), pp. 311–324; Andrea Giardina, “Tardoantico: appunti sul dibattito attuale”, *Studi storici*, XLV/1 (2004), pp. 41–46; and Wolf Liebeschuetz, “The Birth of Late Antiquity”, *Antiquité Tardive*, xii (2004), pp. 253–261.

Fragmentation is meant here in its broadest sense: an umbrella term encompassing various manifestations of cultural, social, and geopolitical disintegration that accompanied the end of the Western Roman Empire. The concepts of fragmentation and heterogeneity, introduced into the scholarly discourse notably with the birth of postmodern theories, have indeed proven to be particularly useful tools for understanding late antique art not as a product of decadence, but rather as an expression of creative reappropriation of the past<sup>10</sup>. The ensuing rehabilitation of the period has brought to the fore the capacity of late antique art and culture to prefigure some of the characteristics and concerns of postmodernism.

Within literary studies, it was, for example, late antique awareness of the materiality and atomistic nature of language and the signification process itself that was identified as corresponding to (post-)structuralist concerns about the (elusive) significance of language as a means of communication. This subject has been recently examined by Jesús Hernández Lobato, who characterized Late Antiquity as a real “linguistic turn” from classical antiquity and whose perspective is indebted to current trends in reading late antique literary production as a mirror of and a potential source of inspiration for postmodern thinking<sup>11</sup>.

For visual culture, the idea that some of the aesthetic trends in Late Antiquity correspond to the concerns of postmodernism and the avant-garde has been explored, especially regarding the irruption of a new visual idiom and the emergence of more “abstract”, “conceptual”, and “symbolic” forms of expression<sup>12</sup>. Similarly, from the perspective of a “long Late Antiquity” with its ever-wider contours, the concept of the fragmentation of the Roman Empire has been helpful to account for the multiplicity of voices and actors involved in the complex transformation of the ancient world<sup>13</sup>. This perspective, partly indebted to Peter Brown’s groundbreaking framework, was explored notably by Jaś Elsner, who promoted a much-needed decolonizing and cross-cultural approach to the late antique world (and, more generally, within the field of art history)<sup>14</sup>. In the same direction, recent studies have highlighted the essential role of visual culture in the transformation of Late Antiquity<sup>15</sup>.

These and similar preoccupations teach us as much about the late antique world as about what generations of researchers have projected onto the past. The broad concept of fragmentation – which has obviously been applied to not only Late Antiquity but also other “threshold periods” – is therefore to be understood within its changing historiographical actualizations<sup>16</sup>. As Gérard Nauroy has pointed out, one of the great moments of a renewed interest in Late Antiquity after the Enlightenment must be identified under the impulse of *fin de siècle* writers<sup>17</sup>. Feelings of *ennui*, disillusionment, and melancholy, as in Paul Verlaine’s famous verses, projected onto the past are based precisely on the prejudices that have circulated about the period since at least the fifteenth century: the decadence, indolence, and languor of the last Romans at the sunset of their empire<sup>18</sup>. On the other hand, decomposition and fragmentation were also seen as positive impulses opposing the ideal of classicism. This is notably the case with the caustic pen of Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907) and his *À Rebours* (1884), probably the most famous of the nineteenth-century decadent novels [Fig. 3]. Through his protagonist, Jean des Esseintes, the archetype of a solitary aesthete who delights in decadence, Huysmans describes in eloquent terms the effect of the progressive “decomposition” of the Latin language:

“Then the Latin language, which arrived at its supreme maturity under Petronius, began to decay; Christian literature replaced it, bringing new words with new ideas, unused constructions, strange verbs, adjectives with subtle meanings, abstract words that were previously rare in the Roman



3/ Joris-Karl  
Huysmans,  
1898

language and that Tertullian had been one of the first to adopt into use. [...] that special flavor that in the fourth century, and particularly during the following centuries, the odor of Christianity would give the pagan tongue, decomposed like old venison, crumbling at the same time that the old world civilization collapsed and the Empires, putrefied by the sanies of the centuries, succumbed to the thrusts of the barbarians<sup>19</sup>.”

- 10 *Décadence. “Decline and Fall” or “Other Antiquity”?*, Marco Formisano, Therese Fuhrer eds, Heidelberg 2014.
- 11 Jesús Hernández Lobato, “Late Antique Foundations of Postmodern Theory: A Critical Overview”, in *Reading Late Antiquity*, Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed, Mats Malm eds, Heidelberg 2018, pp. 51–70; cf. Jesús Hernández Lobato, “Conceptual Poetry: Rethinking Optatian from Contemporary Art”, in *Morphogrammata / The Lettered Art of Optatian: Figuring Cultural Transformations in the Age of Constantine*, Michael Squire, Johannes Wienand eds, Paderborn 2017, pp. 461–493; and also Simon Goldhill, *Preposterous Poetics: The Politics and Aesthetics of Form in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge 2020.
- 12 See, e.g., Sarah Bassett, “Late Antique Art and Modernist Vision”, in *Envisioning Worlds in Late Antique Art: New Perspectives on Abstraction and Symbolism in Late Roman and Early Byzantine Visual Culture (c. 300–600)*, Cecilia Olovsson ed., Berlin/Boston 2019, pp. 5–28.
- 13 Actually, the concept of fragmentation has sometimes been used to define a field of study itself: Andrea Giardina, “Esplosione di tardoantico”, *Studi storici*, XL (1999), pp. 157–180.
- 14 See, e.g., *Empires of Faith in Late Antiquity: Histories of Art and Religion from India to Ireland*, Jaś Elsner ed., Cambridge 2020; *Idem*, “Art, Religion and Narrative: A Comparison of Early Christian and Early Buddhist Indian Art”, *Codex Aquilarensis*, xxxvii (2021), pp. 537–553; and *Idem*, “Other Worlds: Utopias in the Art of Late Ancient Eurasia”, *West 86th*, xxviii/1 (2021), pp. 19–42.
- 15 *A Globalised Visual Culture? Towards a Geography of Late Antique Art*, Fabio Guidetti, Katharina Meinecke eds, Oxford/Philadelphia 2020; *Means of Christian Conversion in Late Antiquity: Objects, Bodies, and Rituals*, Klára Doležalová, Ivan Foletti, Katarína Kravčíková, Pavla Tichá eds, Brno/Turnhout 2022 (= *Convivium*, supplementum III [2021]).
- 16 For the idea of the “threshold periods”, see *Epochenschwelle und Epochenbewusstsein*, Reinhart Herzog, Reinhart Koselleck eds, Munich 1987.
- 17 Gérard Nauroy, “L’homme de l’Antiquité tardive au miroir de nos fins de siècle”, *Mémoires de l’Académie nationale de Metz*, vii/9 (1996), pp. 161–176; cf. Étienne Wolff, “Quelques jalons dans l’histoire de la réception de Sidoine Apollinaire”, in *Décadence* (n. 10), pp. 249–262, sp. pp. 258–260; and Scott McGill, “Reading against the Grain: Late Antique Literature in Huysmans’ *À Rebours*”, in *Reading Late Antiquity* (n. 11), pp. 85–104.
- 18 Paul Verlaine, “Langueur”, in *Idem, Jadis et Naguère. Poésies*, Paris 1884, p. 104; regarding the prejudices about the period that circulated from the fifteenth century, see Santo Mazzarino, *La fine del mondo antico*, Milan 1959.
- 19 “[...] la langue latine, arrivée à sa maturité suprême sous Pétrone, allait commencer à se dissoudre; la littérature chrétienne prenait place, apportant avec des idées neuves, des mots nouveaux, des constructions inemployées, des verbes inconnus, des adjectifs aux sens alambiqués, des mots abstraits, rares jusqu’alors dans la langue romaine, et dont Tertullien avait, l’un des premiers, adopté l’usage. [...] ce fumet spécial qu’au quatrième siècle, et surtout pendant les siècles qui vont suivre, l’odeur du christianisme donnera à la langue païenne, décomposée comme une venaison, s’émettant en même temps que s’effritera la civilisation du vieux monde, en même temps que s’écrouleront sous la poussée des Barbares, les Empires putréfiés par la sanie des siècles” (Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À Rebours*, Paris 1884, pp. 44–45).



And a little further on, continuing to follow the “meaty” metaphor common among decadent poets:

“The interest that des Esseintes felt for the Latin language did not pause during this period that found it drooping, thoroughly putrid, losing its members and dropping its pus, and barely preserving through all the corruption of its body those still firm elements that the Christians detached to marinate in the brine of their new language<sup>20</sup>.”

The idea of a creative decomposition that allows the birth of a new idiom can also be found, a few years later, in the writings of Remy de Gourmont (1858–1915). In his *Latin mystique* published in 1892 and prefaced by Huysmans himself, Gourmont praised the aesthetic ideal of the late Roman Empire, comparing late Latin poetry to symbolism and underlining the effectiveness of the stylistic decomposition found in late antique authors:

“It is at the precise time when one neglects it that the Latin language starts to offer here and there the seductions of stylistic decomposition, to express itself not any more in the immutable jargon of rhetoricians, but according to the personal temperament of Orientals or barbarians foreign to Roman discipline – until the victory of popular idioms relinquished it to the museum of oratory instruments<sup>21</sup>.”

This time, the process of late antique decomposition, as Gourmont pointed out, seems to be linked with what we would call today intercultural exchanges: the personal temperaments of Orientals and barbarians, foreigners with diverse cultural backgrounds, are portrayed as a decisive factor in the transformation of what the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had, since Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) at the latest, constructed as the unsurpassable ideal of Greco-Roman visual and literary culture. This ideal was embodied, throughout the nineteenth century, in neoclassicism<sup>22</sup>. Against this doxa, the idea that the fragmentation of the empire conveniently offered a new space for communities and voices previously marginal in the Roman world was gaining ground. For Huysmans and Gourmont, this fresh wind blowing over the Roman Empire was undoubtedly an alternative, at least rhetorically, to the academicism that dominated the French Third Republic. Late Antiquity thus became almost a symbol of possible liberation, aesthetic, intellectual, and political, from the dominant structure<sup>23</sup>.

### Late antique fragmentation and the birth of modern “nations” and new art forms

In historical and historiographical terms, the fragmentation of the Roman world was also notably conceptualized as giving rise to the birth of modern nations<sup>24</sup>. This phenomenon can be observed not only in those states that once formed the heart of the Roman Empire – such as Italy and to a certain extent France – but also in states built in territories formerly dominated by nomadic peoples who participated in the political transformation of the late antique world.

In Italy, especially from the years of the *Risorgimento* onward, with an acceleration in the two Fascist decades, Constantine’s reign logically became a mirror of “authentic Italian-ness”<sup>25</sup>. In the Germanophone milieu, perception of his reign was more nuanced, oscillating between the myth of continuity with Greece and Rome and the emancipation provoked by the *Völkerwanderung*<sup>26</sup>. In his influential *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* given in Vienna in 1808 and published from 1809 to 1811, which had a considerable impact on contemporary thinking, August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845) expressed, among other thoughts, his ideas about the birth of Romanticism in European culture. He described how those who adopted this intellectual framework

“[...] gave to the peculiar spirit of modern art, as contrasted with antique or classical, the name ‘romantic’. The term is certainly not inappropriate; the word is derived from romance – the name

originally given to the languages which were formed from the mixture of the Latin and the old Teutonic dialects, in the same manner as modern civilization [*Bildung* of Europe] is the fruit of the heterogeneous union of the peculiarities of the northern nations and the fragments of antiquity [*Bruchstücke des Alterthumes*]<sup>27</sup>.”

As with the decadents, the heterogeneity provoked by the “fall of Rome” is here seen as a creative and to some extent liberating energy that allows the formation of new languages and also identities that will later become “nations”. August’s younger brother, Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), even saw in the fragmentation of the Roman Empire under the impulse of the Germanic people the true origins of the birth of modern Europe, thus reversing the negative perception of “barbarian invasions” predominant in Italy and France throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries<sup>28</sup>. Of course, these German authors’ belief that the Germanic peoples played the decisive role in the dynamics accompanying the transformation of the ancient world is not surprising: these were the very thinkers, from Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) to the Schlegel brothers, whose writings were instrumental in the birth of the modern German nation as such<sup>29</sup>. The role played by the instrumentalization of Late Antiquity as a period of “fertile disintegration” and the role of new Northern Germanic peoples in the dynamic formation of modern “nations” are, in this sense, fundamental<sup>30</sup>. There is no need to enter into the disastrous developments of this ideology during the interwar period and the Second World War<sup>31</sup>.

Following this relationship established in the nineteenth century between the end of the Roman Empire and the birth of new peoples, it is not surprising that the idea of radical transformations at all cultural levels in Late Antiquity was a central topic for art historians as influential as Alois Riegl (1858–1905), Julius von Schlosser (1866–1938), and Max Dvořák (1874–1921). In different ways, they all focused precisely on the transformative

20 “L’intérêt que portait des Esseintes à la langue latine ne faiblissait pas, maintenant que complètement pourrie, elle pendait, perdant ses membres, coulant son pus, gardant à peine toute la corruption de son corps, quelques parties fermes que les chrétiens détachaient afin de les mariner dans la saumure de leur nouvelle langue” (Huysmans, *À Rebours* [n. 19], p. 49).

21 “C’est à l’époque précise où on la délaisse que la langue latine commence à offrir ça et là les séductions de la décomposition stylistique, à s’exprimer non plus en un immuable jargon de rhéteur, mais selon le tempérament personnel d’orientaux ou de barbares étrangers à la discipline romaine, – jusqu’à ce que la victoire des idiomes populaires la relègue au musée des instruments oratoires” (Remy de Gourmont, *Le Latin Mystique. Les poètes de l’antiphonaire et la symbolique au Moyen Âge*, Paris 1892, p. 12).

22 See, e.g., Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History*, New Haven 1994.

23 Valérie Grandjean, “Remy de Gourmont contre la ‘Décadence’ et contre la ‘Renaissance’: un symboliste sceptique dans le débat nationaliste à la veille de 1914”, in *L’histoire littéraire des écrivains. Paroles vives*, Marie Blaise, Sylvie Triaire, Alain Vaillant eds, Montpellier 2009, pp. 211–226.

24 On this broad subject, see sp. Éric Michaud, *The Barbarian Invasions: A Genealogy of the History of Art*, Cambridge, MA / London 2019 [2015].

25 See, e.g., Giovanni Belardelli, “Il mito fascista della romanità”, in *Il classico nella Roma contemporanea. Mito, modelli, memoria*, Atti del Convegno (Roma, 18–20 ottobre 2000), vol. II, Fernanda Roscetti ed., Rome 2002, pp. 325–358; and Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo di pietra*, Rome/Bari 2007.

26 See Michaud, *The Barbarian Invasions* (n. 24), pp. 95–120.

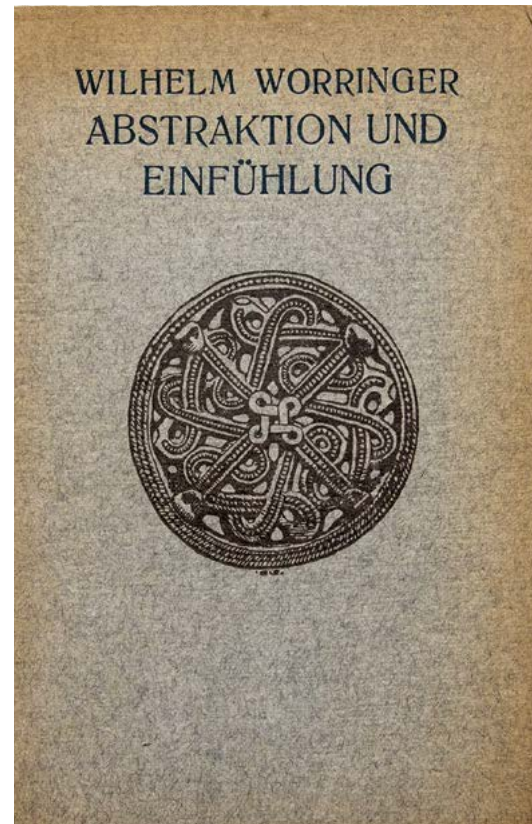
27 August W. Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, A. J. W. Morrison, John Black transls, London 1846, pp. 21–22; the original is quoted in, e.g., Michaud, *The Barbarian Invasions* (n. 24), p. 246, n. 4: “Die, welche dieß annahmen, haben für den eigenthümlichen Geist der modernen Kunst, im Gegensatz mit der antike oder classischen, den Nahmen romantisch erfunden. Allerdings nicht unpassend: das Wort kommt her von romance, der Benennung der Volkssprachen, welche sich durch die Vermischung des Lateinischen mit den Mundarten des Altdeutschen gebildet hatten, gerade wie die neuere Bildung aus den fremdartigen Bestandtheilen der nordischen Stammesart und der Bruchstücke des Alterthumes zusammen geschmolzen ist.”

28 See chiefly Michaud, *The Barbarian Invasions* (n. 24), pp. 97–99.

29 *Ibidem*, *passim*; cf. also Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*, Princeton, NJ, 2002.

30 Walter Goffart, “None of Them Were Germans: Northern Barbarians in Late Antiquity”, in *Idem, Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire*, Philadelphia 2006, pp. 187–229; cf. also Klaus von See, *Barbar, Germane, Arier. Die Suche nach der Identität der Deutschen*, Heidelberg 1994.

31 Von See, *Barbar, Germane, Arier* (n. 30), *passim*.



4/ Cover of Alois Riegl, *Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn*, Vienna 1901

5/ Cover of Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie*, Munich 1908

power of the late antique, with a special interest in the transition between classical antiquity and the Middle Ages<sup>32</sup>. In 1902, a year after the publication of his *Spätromische Kunst-Industrie* [Fig. 4], Alois Riegl argued that “the problem of Late Antiquity is [...] the most important and decisive in the history of mankind up to now”<sup>33</sup>. For these art historians, some of whom flourished during the progressive disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – to which they were often loyally bound – it was the transformative power of Late Antiquity that was responsible for the emergence of a new visual and aesthetic culture<sup>34</sup>.

In a broader context, the birth of a new aesthetic paradigm for these authors had a psychologizing dimension, which obviously corresponded with the emergence of psychoanalysis in those days. Such a perspective had far-ranging implications for understanding late antique art; contemporary interest in interior life as a mirror of moments of personal crisis and/or transformative experiences was an ideal platform onto which the transition period of the third to the eight centuries could meaningfully be projected. This period thus came to be considered as an eloquent example of how societies could be reconfigured in cultural, religious, aesthetic, and spiritual terms following a crisis.

The question of the visual transformation that took place from the third to the eight centuries has therefore become central for reasons conditioned by these authors’ own concerns: on the one hand, from the nineteenth century onward, there was a considerable need to rethink the role of “Germans” in the creative fragmentation of the ancient world; on the other hand, the Viennese authors at the end of the nineteenth century were naturally eager to rethink the place of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Europe. In both cases, Late Antiquity provided an ideal instrument and “historical” parallel to satisfy these needs.

In the same period, the transformation of the ancient world and the accompanying phenomenon of fragmentation felt across different cultural domains were often associated with abstraction. These links were notably made by Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965), one of the most prominent representatives of the psychological approach to artistic forms. A student of Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Riegl, Worringer introduced in his most famous work *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (1908) a globalizing psychological model to explain the two main directions of the development of Western visual culture [Fig. 5]<sup>35</sup>. His arguments immediately resonated with modern art concepts and contemporary concerns around abstract versus naturalistic art, contributing to debates about modernism and the avant-garde<sup>36</sup>. For Worringer, abstraction in art comes from heightened sensitivity and a psychological desire to transcend nature as opposed to *Einfühlung*, empathy, at ease with the faithful representation of nature. This opposition, in his view, also manifested "ethnically"; in the difference between the northern, abstract, art forms and the southern European, more mimetic, forms, as well as religiously, with a distinction between those religions more inclined to transcendence and those based rather on immanence. Worringer argued that certain peoples were more predisposed to producing certain forms of art than others were. The predominance of stylization, geometrical forms, and fragmentary patterns – the general drive toward abstraction – would then be the result of mankind's feelings of alienation toward the world:

"Now what are the psychic presuppositions for the urge to abstraction? We must seek them in these peoples' feeling about the world, in their psychic attitude toward the cosmos. Whereas the precondition for the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world, the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a greater inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world; in a religious respect it corresponds to a strongly transcendental tinge in all notions. We might describe this state as an immense spiritual dread of space<sup>37</sup>."

Such alienation and insecurity toward the world would be found especially in "primitive" peoples, but also, for example, according to Worringer, in "Byzantine" and "Gothic" art.

32 Julius von Schlosser, "Heidnische Elemente in der christlichen Kunst des Altertums", in *Idem, Präludien. Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Berlin 1927 [1894], pp. 29–35; *Idem*, "Zur Genesis der mittelalterlichen Kunstanschauung", *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung. Ergänzungs-Band*, VI (1901), pp. 760–791; Alois Riegl, *Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn*, Vienna 1901; Max Dvořák, "Les Aliscans", in *Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte. Franz Wickhoff gewidmet von einem Kreise von Freunden und Schülern*, Vienna 1903, pp. 11–23.

33 "Das spätantike Problem ist [...] das wichtigste und entscheidendste in der ganzen bisherigen Geschichte der Menschheit" (Alois Riegl, "Spätromisch oder orientalisch", *Beilage zur Allgemeinen Zeitung*, XCIII/XCIV [23 & 24 April 1902], pp. 153–156, 162–165, cit. p. 153; reprinted in *Maske und Kothurn*, LVIII [2012], pp. 11–26); see Georg Vasold, "Bemerkungen zu Alois Riegls Artikel 'Spätromisch oder orientalisch'", in *Maske und Kothurn*, LVIII (2012), pp. 27–68.

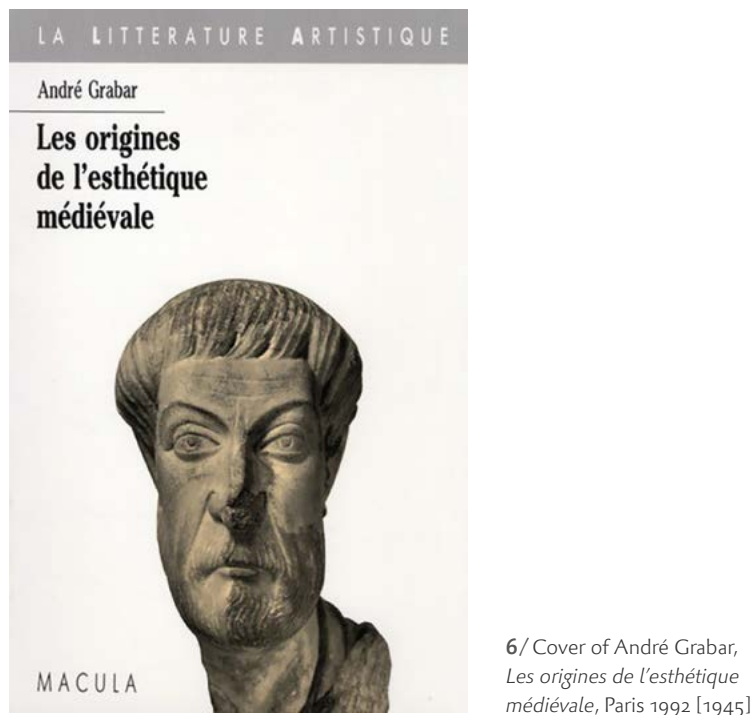
34 Margaret Olin, "Art History and Ideology: Alois Riegl and Josef Strzygowski", in *Cultural Visions: Essays in the History of Culture*, Penny Schine Gold, Benjamin C. Bax eds, Amsterdam 2000, pp. 151–170; Georg Vasold, "Der Blick in den tragischen Spiegel. Zur kunsthistorischen Erforschung der Spätantike in Wien um 1900", in *The Nineteenth-Century Process of 'Musealization' in Hungary and Europe*, Ernő Marosi, Gábor Klaniczay eds, Budapest 2006, pp. 91–112; Jaś Elsner, "The Birth of Late Antiquity: Riegl and Strzygowski in 1901", *Art History*, xxv/3 (2002), pp. 358–379; and *Idem*, "The Viennese Invention of Late Antiquity: Between Politics and Religion in the Forms of Late Roman Art", in *Empires of Faith* (n. 14), pp. 110–127.

35 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, Chicago 1997 [1908]; cf. *Hundert Jahre "Abstraktion und Einfühlung". Konstellationen um Wilhelm Worringer*, Norberto Gramaccini, Johannes Rößler eds, Paderborn 2012.

36 Neil H. Donahue, *Invisible Cathedrals: The Expressionist Art History of Wilhelm Worringer*, University Park, PA, 1995; Rhys W. Williams, "Wilhelm Worringer and the Historical Avant-Garde", in *Avant-Garde / Neo-Avant-Garde*, Dietrich Scheunemann ed., Amsterdam / New York 2005, pp. 49–62.

37 Worringer, *Abstraktion und Empathy* (n. 35), p. 15.





6/ Cover of André Grabar,  
*Les origines de l'esthétique  
médiévale*, Paris 1992 [1945]

It is thus not surprising that “abstract” forms of art would become more and more dominant in the later Roman world, a moment when the “happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world” would have been fractured. Furthermore, the rise of a more transcendental relationship to the divine, together with the success of monotheistic Christianity, might have been a reaction to the progressive disintegration of the Roman social order<sup>38</sup>. These phenomena would have, in turn, pushed visual culture toward a more abstract and conceptual mode of representation.

Worringer’s theory is particularly important for our perspective because it unites ethnic predispositions, psychological and religious aspects, and visual culture, relating them to broader cultural phenomena, including a tendency of late antique art to move toward the transcendental and spiritual. This perspective had a lasting impact on later reconsiderations of the arts of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages when faithful imitation of nature was suddenly no longer at the center of aesthetic appreciation. Indeed, similar ideas, although stemming from a different point of view, underpin André Grabar’s (1896–1990) influential 1945 article on the origins of medieval aesthetics<sup>39</sup>. In this text, Grabar proposed viewing the visual transformation of the late antique world in relation to a more transcendental, fragmented, and abstract aesthetic. For Grabar – who used the thoughts of the Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus (ca 204/205–270) as a *fil rouge* – the fragmented vision becomes a way of seeing beyond the appearances of the physical world toward a more spiritual one [Fig. 6]<sup>40</sup>. Such a vision will be at the roots of the thoughts proposed by such influential figures as Kurt Weitzmann (1904–1993) and Ernst Kitzinger (1912–2003), who contributed in a decisive way to the broad and still open question of the birth of “medieval aesthetics”. Throughout the historiography that we have sketched, a more “positive” way of looking at the “fall of Rome” and the transformation of late antique culture thus permitted not only (re)constructing a more nuanced view of the period, but also highlighting many of the phenomena that would become inherent to medieval culture – from the poetics of “ruin” to spiritual seeing<sup>41</sup>.



The papers included in the present volume are also indebted to such a development in historiographical thinking about Late Antiquity. Ivan Foletti and Marie Okáčová open the volume with a fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue on various manifestations of creative fragmentation in both the literary and visual cultures of Late Antiquity. Jana Mikulová offers a close examination of the means of marking direct discourse, highlighting how late Latin authors composed their texts in both rupture and continuity with the classical style. Chiara Croci revisits and challenges the premises of the long-lasting debate on “abbreviated” or “signitive” images as a new visual strategy for early Christian art, while Alberto Virdis proposes a radically new narrative on the birth of stained glass from late antique visual forms. Finally, Katharina Meinecke goes beyond the boundaries of Mediterranean Late Antiquity to examine the ways in which the spread of ornaments across different media provoked cross-cultural dialogue across Afro-Eurasia. The volume is closed by two chronicles, one by Marco Aimone on two Byzantine capitals that bring new data on architectural sculpture in the sixth century and one by Renate J. Pillinger that casts new light on a series of early Christian gold glasses and their iconography.

Through the present research, we would thus like to go beyond historiographical myths, while following recent trends in late antique studies. In the humanities, Late Antiquity has been systematically conceptualized as a profound moment of fragmentation, which very often resonated directly with the concerns of individual scholars that were for various reasons projected onto the past. Whether or not we agree that there was indeed an “aesthetics” of Late Antiquity, a question that several of the papers in this volume try to address, the instrumentalization of the period in terms of transformative fragmentation became a means of making sense of various moments in history by reinterpreting the heritage of the late antique past. More than anything, perhaps, the idea of fragmentation as a creative and memory-building mechanism responds to our psychological need, throughout the ages, to make sense of the past to understand the present<sup>42</sup>.

38 Bassett, “Late Antique Art” (n. 12), pp. 17–19; see also James Trilling, “Medieval Art without Style? Plato’s Loo-phole and a Modern Detour”, *Gesta*, xxxiv/1 (1995), pp. 57–62.

39 André Grabar, “Plotin et les origines de l’esthétique médiévale”, *Cahiers archéologiques*, I (1945), pp. 15–34. Grabar’s framework was indebted to his Russian formation followed by his emigration to a French milieu; see Adrien Palladino, “Transforming Medieval Art from Saint Petersburg to Paris: André Nikolajevič Grabar’s Fate and Scholarship between 1917 and 1945”, in *Transformed by Emigration: Welcoming Russian Intellectuals, Scientists and Artists 1917–1945*, Ivan Foletti, Karolina Foletti, Adrien Palladino eds, Brno/Turnhout 2020 (= *Convivium*, supplementum [2020]), pp. 122–143.

40 Adrien Palladino, “André Grabar, Plotinus, and the Potency of Late Antique Images”, in André Grabar, *Plotinus and the Origins of Medieval Aesthetics*, Adrien Palladino ed. and transl., Brno/Rome 2018, pp. 13–54 (with further references).

41 See, e.g., Roy M. Liuzza, “The Tower of Babel: The Wanderer and the Ruins of History”, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, xxxvi/1 (2003), pp. 1–35; regarding spiritual seeing, see Herbert L. Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God’s Invisibility in Medieval Art*, Philadelphia 2000.

42 See Olof Heilo, “Postscript: The Meaning of Ruins”, in *Spoilation as Translation: Medieval Worlds in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Ivana Jevtić, Ingela Nilsson eds, Brno/Turnhout 2021 (= *Convivium*, supplementum II [2021]), pp. 194–199.