

Conspiracy or Religious History?

Some objections to Trevor Palmer's hasty classification of the Heinsohn-Thesis as conspiracy theory

by Jan Beaufort*

In his essay *The Chronology of Europe from the Reign of Septimius Severus to that of Maurice, according to Sources from the Fourth to the Ninth Centuries*, Trevor Palmer summarizes traditional knowledge of the chronology of Europe from the rule of Septimius Severus to Maurice. In addition, he draws attention to many places where Gunnar Heinsohn's theory of the catastrophic fall of the Roman Empire in the 3rd = 6th = 10th century stands in contradiction to this traditional knowledge.

These numerous contradictions to traditional knowledge, Palmer assumes, insinuate that Heinsohn must support the idea of a conspiracy among those who passed down this traditional knowledge ("conspiracy of forgery on a gigantic scale"), because the traditional knowledge is in itself consistent ("high degree of consistency"). In other words, according to Palmer the consistency of traditional knowledge either proves its truth, or the traditional knowledge itself would be the result of a gigantic conspiracy; a third possibility is inconceivable. Since Palmer now rightly rejects the idea of a grand conspiracy, logically he cannot help but reject Heinsohn's thesis. Because this is clear, he no longer needs – again, being logically consistent – to deal with Heinsohn's thesis from the perspectives of archaeology, geology, architecture and scientific age determination. However, according to Palmer, – and here he is a bit inconsistent – it is

* I'm deeply indebted to Clark Whelton for translating the originally German text.

not possible to reach a final judgment on Heinsohn's thesis without considering those perspectives.¹

But such an argument seems to miss the point of the Heinsohn-Thesis and cannot really be dangerous to it, because Heinsohn starts at the exact opposite pole of the field under consideration. In particular, evidence from the fields of archaeology and the history of architecture, art and technology seems to contradict the traditional written sources of knowledge. Heinsohn has now collected these contradictions in numerous texts.

Palmer responded to Heinsohn's findings with the answer: then the findings must be wrong, because the traditional written sources of knowledge are consistent. For Heinsohn, on the other hand, the first problem is how to reconcile those contradictions with the written sources. Palmer has a ready answer: "The inevitable conclusion seems to be that, if the Heinsohn model is correct, there must have been a conspiracy of forgery on a gigantic scale." From this position, then, he no longer needs to give serious consideration to Heinsohn's discoveries. For Heinsohn, however, the tedious work of reconstructing post-catastrophe history of text-tradition is just beginning.

Arguments against Palmer's approach, among others, are the following:

- 1) Palmer's assertion of a "high degree of consistency in the information provided by different sources" remains merely a rhetorical turn, as long as it does not exactly define what "high degree of consistency" means. It would certainly not be difficult to show endless numbers of contradictions between historical sources. The question is always how much weight should be attached to the consistencies and differences between the sources.²

¹ "It is acknowledged that Heinsohn's arguments are interdisciplinary, and hence need to be considered from a variety of other perspectives, such as archeology, geology, architecture and scientific dating. Hence it would be inappropriate to express any definite conclusions about whether or not the model is likely to be correct just on the basis of one aspect of the evidence. Nevertheless, it should be abundantly clear ..."

² Just a small example: „Même si le phénomène [the Ammianus-Tsunami 365 AD, jb] n'a pas toujours été compris et si sa datation est parfois à l'évidence erronée, nous avons assurément un unique tsunami dont nous avons trouvé la mention chez *vingt-neuf* auteurs différents. La date, le 21 juillet 365, est donnée par *quatre* sources: *les autres datations, de Julien à Gratiien peuvent être dues à des confusions involontaires ou à des falsifications*“ [italics from me, jb] - see Jacques, Bousquet (1984), pp. 439. Twenty five contradictory sources for the authors Jacques and Bousquet are therefore not important when four sources contain the desired statement. The sources have, so to speak "a high degree of consistency". One need only read Kelly (2004) or Bleckmann (2007) to make clear how

- 2) Accordingly, there are sources that are more, and sources that are less, in agreement with the Heinsohn thesis. Thus, there are late antique authors who speak of a global disaster in Late Antiquity.³ Traditional historians consider such claims as implausible exaggerations. From the perspective of the Heinsohn-thesis, however, they are to be taken seriously. For Palmer, because of the assumed consistency of traditional knowledge, these conflicting mainstream reports, strictly speaking, should not exist.⁴

- 3) Must one speak of such contradictory source material as a "conspiracy," when dealing with archeology, as well as the history of architecture, art and technology, leads to a weighting of the written sources that is different than usual? It would seem to make more sense to think about other, more nuanced solutions. For supporters of the Heinsohn-thesis, it is right here, in the field of written source interpretation, that we can expect further research to find many more exciting discoveries.

Granted, we do not have a ready solution to all the problems in this early stage of research. But we are guided by the following facts: In the first half of the 10th century AD/CE *all* of the more than 5000 Roman cities and towns⁵ had been destroyed by a global catastrophe, including the forts, the aqueducts, etc. All or almost all ancient scrolls were buried beneath the ruins of these cities, destroyed by fire or washed away by tsunamis.⁶ Also, temples throughout the empire were flattened. Where he could, Justinian rebuilt the cities, no longer with pagan temples and theaters, but with

much the *providentialism* (see below in the text) in the allegedly reliable witnesses of Ammianus is at work. The fact that in the providentialist literature disaster reports accumulate shortly before or shortly after the death of heathen Emperor Julian, can by no means lead to a conclusion as to the correct date of that catastrophe.

- ³ For example just Ammianus: "...on 21 July in the year in which Valentinian was consul for the first time with his brother [A.D. 365], fearsome terrors suddenly strode *through the whole circle of the world*, the like of which neither legends nor truthful ancient histories tell us. Slightly after daybreak, and heralded by a thick succession of fiercely shaken thunderbolts, *the solidity of the whole earth was made to shake and shudder*, and the sea was driven away, its waves were rolled back ..." [italics from me, jb] – cited from Kelly (2004), p. 141.
- ⁴ Also, a good example of the trivialising traditional handling of unwieldy reports about global catastrophes is the quoted text of Jacques and Bousquet. a.a.O. (1984), starting on page 450.
- ⁵ Number according to Mommsen (1994), p. 565 [courtesy Ewald Ernst].
- ⁶ In the meantime, the presumption that papyrus is less durable than parchment, and that therefore all ancient scrolls were lost, has now been refuted by research, and by the fact that numerous ancient papyri have survived to this day.

churches. Thus, the eastern empire became Christian-Catholic, while the western Empire was taken over by Goths, Franks, Teutons and Vikings.

How is history written when almost all original sources (such as the Library of Alexandria or the imperial archives in Rome) are missing? Here we should reflect carefully before we lightly throw the word "conspiracy" into the ring. For Justinian, history definitely had to have a clear direction, and that direction was Christian-Catholic. Accordingly, providentialist history was written in Late Antiquity: natural catastrophes were interpreted as God's punishment or as bad omens.⁷



Justinian, giving a model of the Hagia Sophia to the Virgin Mary⁸

⁷ Gavin Kelly defines the widespread tendency of Late Antique literature to interpret natural catastrophes as Divine punishment with the Swiss historian François Paschoud: „Providentialism is narrowly defined by F. Paschoud, [...] 'the conception according to which the fulfilment or nonfulfilment of religious commands has as a rapid, necessary and plainly visible consequence either punishment or reward“ - Kelly (2004), p. 142.

⁸ Hagia Sophia, tympanum of the southwestern entrance, www.paradoxplace.com/Insights/Topkapi/Byzantine%20Constantinople.htm. The mosaic has been dated to the 10th century – i. e. with Heinsohn to the lifetime of Justinian.

Under Justinian, the canonical stock of historical works was built, and was the starting point for all subsequent historiography. Justinian may be responsible for the high degree of consistency that Palmer perceives in traditional historiography. Consistency might only mean that later historians built on the early first beginnings of the post-catastrophe period, without having to ever again call them into question.

Is religious, providentialist history the result of a conspiracy? If many people have the same fantasies about the past and write about them accordingly, have they then formed a conspiracy? If theological or political opponents attack each other with *Pseudepigraphs*, in order to lend an air of authority to their opinions, or to protect themselves against a charge of heresy, have they then conspired?⁹ If Mormons believe that history happened the way it's told in the *Book of Mormon*, and act and think accordingly, are they then engaging in conspiratorial activity?

These rhetorical questions show that there is a big difference between history that goes back to religious or political beliefs and history that has its origin in a conspiracy.¹⁰ The difference, however, is only in the motivation or in the objective, not in the implementation and result. Both types of historiography have preconceived concepts about the course of history and the importance of the respective events. These concepts organize and structure the written material independently of the real course of history. There is now no doubt that Late Antique historiography since Justinian, and also medieval historiography, were often motivated by religion and religious policy. From

⁹ Bernt (1999): „Pseudepigraphy: false attribution. The vicissitudes of the textual tradition and a contradictory attitude that on the one hand the work was esteemed higher than the author, while on the other hand the name of a noted authority had to confirm the work, contributed to the fact that medieval literature is very rich in false attributions. Some were written through misunderstandings, others on purpose. For example, numerous works were falsely attributed or imputed to St. Augustine, Jerome, Bernard of Clairvaux and Albertus Magnus. In this way pseudepigrapha contributed to the image of the medieval author. Often, however, modern editors have increased the number of pseudepigrapha (Beda, Hildebert of Lavardin). Sometimes the deception was deliberately intended by the author (pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, pseudo-Hieronimus of Nativitate Mariae, pseudo-Ovidius de Vetula) in order to give the work greater impact, or as protection against an accusation of heresy, or, eventually just for fun sometimes [...]”

¹⁰ If this latter kind of historiography is imaginable at all; for those who operate with the conspiracy argument usually remain rather vague with respect to its concrete meaning. *Wikipedia* defines conspiracy theory thus: “A **conspiracy theory** is an explanatory proposition that accuses two or more persons, a group, or an organization of having caused or covered up, through secret planning and deliberate action, an illegal or harmful event or situation.” Evidently, providential history differs from conspiratorial historiography by not planning illegal or harmful events.

the standpoint of the Heinsohn-thesis thus far, at least three major phases of historiography can be identified:

- 1) For a short time immediately afterward, the disaster was seen as a judgment on Rome and paganism. There is a text by Eusebius, *The Theophany*, which is perhaps the only one that clearly expresses this idea.¹¹ The text has survived only in a Syriac translation – possibly the reason why it was able to survive those perilous times. Here are found the motives for Justinian’s (religious) political program. The text describes a world that has become peaceful and Christian after the catastrophic downfall of Gentiles and polytheists. Instead of temples and theaters, everywhere there are churches. It is the world as Justinian imagined it. Probably, the prevailing opinion in this phase of history was that humanity had just experienced the end of times, and now all was well, or at least should become well, in the foreseeable future.¹²
- 2) In a second phase it became clear that history was continuing. There was now a “before and after,” and this was no longer the End of Times disaster, but at best a harbinger of what could be expected from the End of Times. With this realization must have come several reactions:
 - a) First, from the Apocalypse that had just happened, came the expectation of a future judgment. While Chapters 17 and 18 of the *Book of Revelation* originally just described the catastrophic downfall of Rome, this event is now told in a context that moves it to a distant future.¹³ The Second Coming of Christ was no longer imminent, so it was now necessary to practice patience. The theological term for this shift – usually used in a somewhat different context – is *Parusieverzögerung* (the delay of the *Parousia*).

¹¹ Lee (1843), particularly Book 1 and 2.

¹² Not totally different from a widespread view in neoliberal circles after the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, cf. Fukuyama (1992), *The end of history and the last man*.

¹³ Compare Gentry (1989), pp. 149-151. Nevertheless, theologians who refer to the destruction of Rome as an historical event put it in the context of the burning of Rome by Nero. However, the devastations described in the text of the *Apocalypse*, and in addition their consequences are much more dramatic, with Rome going down „in one day“, even “in one hour“, which points to a severe earthquake or a tsunami.

- b) Next, an attempt was made to show the catholicization of the world by Justinian as a process that was no longer responding to the alleged end of the world, but as one that had begun much earlier. Emperors Constantine and Theodosius were now initiators of a Catholic Imperial religion writ large, although in all likelihood both were still Arian Christians.¹⁴ And so there is a second, smoother and much shortened version of *The Theophany* of Eusebius, which was inserted into a praise of the Emperor Constantine.¹⁵ This later version contains no more references to the disaster. Now it looked like the world had already become Christian under Constantine, though in reality it only happened later under Justinian.
- c) Constantine could only be considered as a forerunner of a Catholic Christian state religion if he did not live at the same time as Jesus or the Roman emperor Tiberius. This may have been one of several reasons for backdating Roman history as compared with Constantinople. The leading motive for this backdating may have been to banish the catastrophe that destroyed Rome not only into the distant future (as in the Apocalypse of John), but also into the distant past. The postponement was made so that the history of Rome to 234 AD was set before the time of the soldier emperors (234-284 AD) and of the Tetrarchy. In reality, it is likely that most soldier-emperors, starting with Gordian, ruled during the first 50 years after Caesar's death, while Diocletian was a contemporary of Caesar Augustus. Historical works, in which the extended history of Rome first appears, are texts within the context of *Enmann's Kaisergeschichte*, where the research has been hitherto puzzling

¹⁴ Again, traditions just do not have a “high degree of consistency”. Today’s research sees the work of Constantine quite differently than Eusebius (see the German *Wikipedia* entry on Constantine): “However, there is little evidence the emperor planned to penalize or ban the traditional cults. Contrary statements by Eusebius are of doubtful credibility. Although Eusebius tells of a general prohibition against pagan sacrificial rites in the year 324, and later Constantius II refers to a relevant law of his father, the veracity of these claims is very controversial. In other traditions, no indication can be found supporting this. The pagan orator Libanius explicitly states that Constantine confiscated goods but did not restrict cultic rituals. Indeed, several modern researchers also reject the statements of Eusebius. Apparently, Eusebius, in his account of Constantine, exaggerated the emperor’s activities in order to strengthen his Christian image. Possibly Constantine only forbade blood sacrifice by the state.”

¹⁵ See Gressmann (1904), p. VI and XIV ff.

(as in the *Historia Augusta*), but also the original version of the *Chronikon paschale* created under Justinian¹⁶. Together with the backdating of Roman history, the zero point of the calendar was backdated by 284 years, thus creating the Christian AD era.¹⁷

- d) Memory of the disaster itself (which took place in 234 AD as seen from Rome, in 518 AD as seen from Byzantium) faded away. Had its date remained 518 AD, the catastrophe could have been easily cited again and again by opponents of the Justinian dynasty as an evil omen for the ability of this dynasty to rule justly. Therefore, in this phase of history, there emerged the idea that a “Julian-catastrophe” happened “shortly before or shortly after the death of the heathen emperor Julian”: in many texts (29 in number) the Justin or Justinian disaster(s) was (were) backdated to the time of Julian, f. e. by Ammianus Marcellinus to the year 365 AD.¹⁸
- 3) From the perspective of Heinsohn’s thesis a third phase of historical reconstruction can be assumed in which Justinian and his time were shifted backward along the timeline by approximately 416 years. Because the disaster actually took place in the 930s of the 10th century CE. So the Justinian dynasty must in reality have reigned until about 1020 CE. Around this time the emperor Maurikios was murdered and Phocas became ruler, and a short time later, Heraclius. For the first time since the disaster, Greek-oriented rulers came to power. In the early 11th century, Byzantine history slowly becomes genuine history, and Heraclius (the first to hold the title *Basileus* after many emperors named *Imperator Augustus*) might be identical with Basil II (d. 1025). The chronology extension is, according to the present state of development of the Heinsohn-thesis, the work of Emperor Konstantinos Monomachos (r. 1042-1055) and his Scholars Circle headed by Michael Psellos (1017/18 to about 1078 or 1096). About this time the two chronicles of Theophanes Confessor and Theophanes Continuatus must have been written, which Heribert Illig thinks

¹⁶ Cf. Schwartz (1899).

¹⁷ By Dionysius Exiguus, a contemporary of Justinian. Instead of the former Diocletian Era he introduces the Christian Era, beginning 284 years earlier.

¹⁸ See footnote 2 and Beaufort (2014).

already contain invented time and invented emperors.¹⁹ In the West, the chronology extension finds a parallel after the Merovingians were overthrown in the early 11th century. The Merovingians ruled Gaul at the same time the Justinian dynasty ruled Byzantium, as Gregory of Tours, in particular, testifies in his history of the Franks.

While Clovis I died before the disaster, his sons survived and held the dynasty together until the early 11th century, when the Capetians came to power. Between Merovingians and Capetians there were never any Carolingians, rather there are several indications the Carolingians should be placed before the catastrophe.²⁰ Probably, the Capetians eventually assumed the long Byzantine chronology and put the Carolingians between themselves and the Merovingians. Admittedly, when and why they would have done that is not yet clear.²¹

The approach presented here is an experimental reconstruction of post-catastrophe traditional history, and is not claimed to be either a finished draft or completely correct. We are only at the beginning of this work, partly groping in utter darkness. Here I tried to show that talk of a "gigantic conspiracy" is a hastily formulated judgment and that, at best, such an opinion could only be arrived at after lengthy and painstaking research. As long as we are unsure of the motives of Late Antique and medieval historians, we should not assume there was a conspiracy.

It seems plausible that after the end of the world in the 10th century, history was reconstructed first as religious or salvation history. Such history does not have to correspond with reality, but that doesn't mean it was the product of a conspiracy (see the *Book of Mormon*). It is not necessarily consistent too. The appearance of consistency in our historical traditions concerning Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages could arise, first, by not noticing the many contradictions that could call that consistency into

¹⁹ See Illig (1999), pp. 159-184.

²⁰ Heinsohn (2014b).

²¹ Indeed, the artificial extension of the chronology in the West can possibly be traced back to Michael Psellos himself. „Psellos prided himself on his title as well as on his international fame as a teacher. In his own words, he attracted students from both the West and the Arab East: 'Celts ... Arabs ... Egyptians ... a man from Babylon', he wrote some time in the 1050s (Letter to Michael Keroularios 96-101)“ – Papaioannou (2013), S. 7.

question; and secondly by the fact that ultimately our traditions are still rooted in the religious beginnings of post-catastrophe history, which we cannot detect and recognize as such because these very beginnings deny they are a fresh start and try to erase that disaster from memory.



Michael Psellos (l.) and Michael VII Doukas²²

²² www.spiegel.de/spiegelgeschichte/bild-954044-660820.html. It's the only surviving picture of Psellos, from an Athos-manuscript (Pantokratos 234.f.254 recto). Papaiannou (2013), S. 13 informs: „The original size of the figures is less than 3 cm tall“.

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