

Abstract for the general public

Late Antiquity, or the early Byzantine period, was a time of fast-paced social, religious, and political changes for the inhabitants of the Roman Middle East. This includes the transformation of Rome into the Christian state, the revival of Jewish and Samaritan religiosity in Palestine and in the diaspora, the beginning of the oppressive policy of the Roman state towards the Jews and Samaritans as well as Christians deemed 'unorthodox' by religious factions currently taking the upper hand, the incursions and settling of Arab tribes, the turmoil caused by the Persian invasions, and the Samaritan uprisings, and many others. Scholars attempted to answer the question about the correlation between these events, and the shaping of particular identities which intensified social and religious tensions, and eventually contributed to the fragmentation of the Eastern Roman Empire. Usually, this is done by referring to identity factors such as, for example, religion, politics, wealth, social structure, etc. On the other hand, this project aims at exploring the role of linguistic distinctiveness of different communities, publicly manifested through their commemorative, monumental inscriptions. The Principal Investigator (PI) supposes that monumental epigraphy, which in the early Byzantine period is largely represented by religious building inscriptions (on stone blocks and mosaics), could be an efficient way of public asserting linguistic distinctiveness for Aramaic-speaking Christians, Jews, and Samaritans, and could reciprocally impact the viewers. This is because in every culture monumental inscriptions are particularly prone to representing even the slightest ideological shifts, as they are *per se* designed to convey the message found worthy of promulgation at present, and passing down to the future generations. They are spectacular 'banners' of communities' historical memory. They are the social 'litmus paper' which immediately reacts to the fluctuations of the cultural and political ambience. Therefore, if we expect to see that language choice did matter to the early Byzantines, it is first of all the monumental epigraphy where we should seek the answer.

The project will explore the validity of this hypothesis against other known identity markers and factors, based on a broad survey of inscriptions in Greek, Classical Syriac (deriving from the Edessene Aramaic dialect), Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, Samaritan Aramaic, and Old (pre-Islamic) Arabic.

The project will be pursued by a small research group, in addition to the PI consisting of a doctoral candidate and a postdoctoral researcher. The team will refer to cross-lingual, comparative analysis of inscriptions, will test the usefulness of several concepts developed by sociolinguistics, and will create an advanced database of sites with non-Greek monumental inscriptions from the early Byzantine East.

The results of the project will be important for all sorts of historians, orientalists, archaeologists, philologists, and the wide audience, interested in global history, and the factors, and instruments of ethnogenesis at the close of antiquity. They may also lead to a revision of existing views on the status of the Greek language in the public space of the early Byzantine Middle East (often over-exaggerated by Classicists). In addition, the results of the project will impact general sociolinguistics, still experimenting with applying their methods to the study of pre-modern societies. Scholars and wide audience will get free access to the on-line database created by the team.