



THE  
LONG SEVENTH  
CENTURY

CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY  
IN AN AGE OF TRANSITION

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## Preface: Evaluating the 'Edinburgh Seventh-Century Colloquium' Experience

The Edinburgh Seventh-Century Colloquium was an interdisciplinary collaboration involving faculties and students from the departments of Archaeology, Art History, Celtic, Classics, History, Islamic Studies and Literature of the University of Edinburgh and built off of the efforts of collaborative institutions, including the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (CMRS) and the Late Antique and Medieval Postgraduate Society (LAMPS). The event highlighted Edinburgh as a research and teaching centre on late antique and early medieval studies across a number of disciplines, providing the opportunity to establish ties between research students in Edinburgh and other institutions. This multinational focus was achieved through the generous assistance of the University of Edinburgh Development Trust, the Innovative Initiative Grant and CMRS, whose help in providing the means to attract a wide range of scholars from different institutions and disciplines was indispensable.

The colloquium was a student-initiated conference for both postgraduates and early-career researchers involved in the study of all aspects of the history, archaeology, art, literature and societies of the wider post-Roman world. The innovative format adopted, which made use of a respondent for each paper presented, was aimed at maximizing the interaction and exchanges between participants at the conference, with constructive feedback and networking opportunities especially emphasized. The event provided the opportunity to share ideas, compare methodologies and exchange data to approach the period under analysis by challenging well-rooted positions in modern scholarship. The natures of the contributions have been various and have spanned from testing the feasibility of innovative

working hypotheses, to providing state-of-the-art accounts on the latest research development within a certain research area.

The general theme was an examination of whether the seventh century can be studied as a unit across regions and of whether the period represents a break in the *longue durée*. Questions of what the level of discontinuity between the 'long sixth' and 'long eighth' centuries has been deeply investigated. We explored how wider perspectives can be used to formulate new approaches to source material, drawing out fresh perspectives on both the familiar and unfamiliar. The study of the seventh-century world has previously been highly fragmented by conventional research boundaries, such as those determined by disciplinary areas, didactic programs and routine, periodization, and national academic traditions. The conference bridged these boundaries by promoting a wider approach, facilitating scholarly exchange and encouraging awareness of research outside the participants' own disciplines and immediate interests.

This volume, whose publication has been generously sponsored by the Department of Archaeology of the SHCA of the University of Edinburgh, represents an attempt to provide the reader with an insight on the heterogeneity of the contributions delivered during the conference by gathering a selection of papers. Its ambition is certainly not to answer in full the question on continuity or discontinuity, which is impossible given the obvious limitations of a two-day conference. In working on such a broad issue, lacunae are certainly unavoidable and in many cases the present contribution raises more questions than answers. Rather it attempts to 'probe' the issue with aimed, specific case studies chosen due to their innovative approach to the problem. It tries to be a stimulus to the reader by providing an array of different perspectives and methodologies applicable to new research areas.

This volume, then, can be seen as accepting the challenge of the work by J. Fontaine and J. N. Hillgarth published more than twenty years ago on *The Seventh Century: Change and Continuity*. It places itself in the same line, presenting '*un choix de quelques « points de sondage », choix conditionné par le sentiment de nos limites*'.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, however, it tries

1 Fontaine 1992: 277.

to broaden the array of the disciplines involved by including the study of material culture, which the organizers believe to be pivotal in the discussion. While archaeology plays a major role in this volume, the importance of studies within literature, the focus of Fontaine's and Hillgarth's work, has not been abandoned. The geographical horizon is also much wider, spanning from west to east. Particular attention is given to themes of change and continuity in the central and eastern Mediterranean – and especially in early Islam.

As will be clear with the following papers, the Edinburgh Seventh-Century Colloquium demonstrated that the debate on continuity and discontinuity in the seventh century is very much alive. It has also shown that answering this question is a particular challenging task that cannot be achieved without setting clear geographical and methodological boundaries across all the disciplines. In some cases clear continuity is evident, but whether discontinuity occurred, we are in line with Fontaine in arguing that this did not happen suddenly but even the greatest breaks were the result of a gradual process of transformation that did not result in the complete obliteration of the past.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, discontinuity does not exclude *a priori* continuity. Even during a century that brought much conquest and colonization, religious and economic change, the past was utilized and remodelled to fit with the change. If we take Woolf and Stoner's papers, we can see the frontier society of proto-Christian, Anglo-Saxon England broke from its past in colonial society and was transforming itself into one with established hierarchies, but continued to maintain traditional expressions of reverence and power. In most cases, a clear label cannot be given, as societies continued to look both backwards towards the past and forwards to the future. The discussion, thus, must and shall continue.

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2 Fontaine 1992: 277.

## Bibliography

- Fontaine, J. (1992). 'Bilan du colloque'. In J. Fontaine and J. N. Hillgarth (eds), *Le septième siècle: changements et continuités. Actes du Colloque bilatéral franco-britannique tenu au Warburg Institute les 8–9 juillet 1988*, 277–282. London: Warburg Institute.