

Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond  
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KONSTANTIN KLEIN (University of Oxford)

"When religion became serious": The Arabs on their way to Monotheism

### Abstract

Successful conversion is often portrayed in the vocabulary of triumph and presented as a *Victory of Reason* (just to name one of the bestselling books with this topic). It is generally juxtaposed with a time of ignorance and superstition before the adoption of the new religion. My paper looks at aspects of conversion at the edge of the later Roman Empire and more specifically at how the Arabs embarked on their journey towards monotheism, – be it Christian or Islamic.

Rather than giving a long enumeration of the texts which deal with this topic, I will focus on one single account, Jerome's description of conversions to Christianity in Elusa (Palaestina III). Taking it as a starting point, I will embed the account into its late antique textual framework, discuss questions of historicity and the cultural context of the text, and will then draw conclusions on what we can learn from the conversion of the Arabs for a more general approach on conversion in Late Antiquity and early Islam.