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# Agnes in Agony: Damasus, Ambrose, Prudentius, and the Construction of the Female Martyr Narrative

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AGNES IN AGONY: DAMASUS, AMBROSE,  
PRUDENTIUS, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF  
THE FEMALE MARTYR NARRATIVE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
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by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the earliest surviving sources on the virgin martyr Agnes. Agnes is significant due to the popularity of her cult and the large number of early sources recounting her martyrdom. This dissertation argues that the fourth-century bishops Damasus and Ambrose, along with the Christian poet Prudentius, helped construct the narrative of Agnes' passion in order to help popularize her cult throughout western Christendom. In an effort to promote virgin asceticism to their communities, they endorsed Agnes as the dominant *exemplum* for female piety in the west. By doing so, they associated themselves with the influential martyr. Since Agnes was a Roman martyr, the role of Damasus, the bishop of Rome, is particularly significant in the formation of the Agnes narrative.

This dissertation examines how the Agnes narrative developed from the simple nine-line *elogium* of Pope Damasus into the complex accounts of Ambrose, Prudentius and the *Gesta Martyrum Romanorum*. It demonstrates that the account of Pope Damasus—although short and seemingly less influential than the near contemporary accounts of Ambrose—was the primary motivator for the development of female hagiography. Damasus was the chief Christian administrator in a city coming to terms with its Christian identity. His *elogia*, which he heavily modeled on Virgilian epic verse, gave Rome a Christian past just as glorious as its pagan heritage. The influence of Damasus can be seen in the works of his younger contemporary Ambrose of Milan, who references the Agnes *elogium*, and the Christian poet Prudentius, who fervently embraces the *elogium* when writing his own classicizing Christian epic.

These authors transformed Agnes from an innocent victim into a classical hero. She was the embodiment of Roman family values that earlier, more controversial female martyrs, like Perpetua of Carthage, could never hope to be. This re-writing of the female martyr narrative was crucial in fourth-century Rome, where Damasus and his successors still struggled with a Roman aristocracy, recently converted to Christianity. Women were the battlefield in a slow conversion process. Agnes was the hero that influential Roman women could look to as a proper Christian *exemplum*.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Roman martyr Agnes died during the Great Persecution of Diocletian, around 305 C.E. According to tradition, Agnes was a young virgin who was just reaching marriageable age. In addition to defending her faith against pagan opposition, Agnes is famous for preserving her virginity. This made Agnes a particularly popular martyr with fourth-century bishops, who increasingly began to call for devotion to an ascetic lifestyle. Liberius and Damasus, both prominent bishops of Rome, and Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, were particularly influential in developing a narrative for this female martyr to serve as an *exemplum* for their congregations and the larger Roman public. The story of Agnes, which developed into the standard narrative for the female saint by the sixth century, was a story inextricably linked to the city of Rome. Its creation is steeped with classical Latin influence, and the imperiled virgin motif that it is built on is as fundamental to Roman tradition as Lucretia or Rhea Silvia. This dissertation will examine the earliest surviving sources on Agnes and put them into their historical context in order to demonstrate the importance of this particular martyr in establishing episcopal authority over the western church.

The ancient Mediterranean world was built upon the interdependence of various cultures, religions, languages, and ethnicities. The Roman Empire was not the product of one city or one political tradition, or one language. The study of early Christianity is the study of an elaborate cultural milieu, which produced countless thoughts and ideas. It is therefore not surprising to see so much debate on the subject of Rome's fall. In 509 B.C.E., Rome was nothing more than a small Italic city-state with a new and unusual form of government. Defining Rome at the "End" of its ancient past is a more difficult



task.<sup>1</sup> Its political institutions had evolved into a Mediterranean empire that had long since abandoned the city called *Roma*. Its language and culture had changed significantly over the course of more than one thousand years of Greek influence. But the customs and traditions of the Romans, the ever important *mos maiorum* of the Roman historians, lived on in new expressions of religion and culture. This dissertation attempts to understand this transformation of traditional values.

This debate on the fall of Rome is tied to the study of early Christianity. In *The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity*, Peter Brown defines a new periodization for Roman history dependent not on the physical foundations of a religion, but on the power and influence of its ideas. Brown, like most historians, saw ancient history divided into grand epochs: “The classical period conjures up the image of the great temple; the Middle Ages, of a Gothic Cathedral.”<sup>2</sup> Brown had a different kind of monument in mind for what he came to describe as the Late Antique epoch: “The predominance of the holy man, therefore, marked out late antiquity as a distinct phase of religious history.”<sup>3</sup> If Brown’s age begins with the powerful holy men and women of the second and third century *Acta* and *passiones*, it ends with birth of a new form of authority, episcopal authority. Behind every Antony suffering in the wilderness was an Athanasius glorifying his deeds for his own theological ends. It was the bishops of Late

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<sup>1</sup>This debate is far too extensive to cover in full here. For a brief review of the literature on Late Antiquity, see Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* Vol. 61 (1971): 80-101; Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Harvard University Press, 1978); Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996); Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages, 400-1000 AD* (Penguin Press, 2010) For opposing points of view, see Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* Vol. 61 (1971): 100.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

Antiquity who profited from the power of the Holy Men. R.A. Markus defines the end of the ancient as the end of the secular: “As Christian discourse shrank to scriptural so the world of which it spoke shrank to the sacred.”<sup>4</sup> This discourse of the sacred was not the product of the martyr; it was the product of the bishop. No bishop profited from this process more the bishop of the city of Rome.

## THE EVOLUTION OF A FEMALE MARTYR ARCHETYPE

The development of the medieval genre of hagiography is one of the crowning achievements of early Christian literature. The medieval saint’s life naturally evolved from the martyr’s passion, just as the saints of Late Antiquity evolved from the martyrs of the ancient Roman world. The debate on the origins of this Christian phenomenon is too complex to address here.<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps best to use G. W. Bowersock’s minimalist definition, which confines the term “martyr” to the classical Greek legal term, “witness,” applying it to those Christian victims of persecution. Bowersock discusses the early use of the term in the context of the death of Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles: “Since he [Stephen] did suffer a violent death and the shedding of his blood is linked to his being called witness, his witnessing could obviously be construed as consisting in that death.”<sup>6</sup>

The *martus*, like the witness in a trial, bears witness to the original passion of Christ with

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<sup>4</sup> R.A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 1990): 226.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on the origins of Christian martyrdom, see W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (New York University Press: 1967); Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford University Press, 1999). For a discussion of its ancient social context, see Peter Brown, “Rise of the Holy Man,” Peter Brown, *Cult of the Saints* (University of Chicago Press, 1981); G.W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Gender, Theory, and Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in the Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of the Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge University Press, 1965).

<sup>6</sup> Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 7.

his or her own sacrifice. This act of “witnessing” can only be assured if someone survives to write down the epic struggle of these Christian heroes. Elizabeth Castelli emphasizes the importance of the audience in the development of the martyr narrative: “One might even go so far as to argue that they did not simply preserve the story of persecution and martyrdom, but, in fact, created it.”<sup>7</sup> The audience itself therefore plays a crucial role in this development process.

The earliest martyr *Actae* were produced in the second and third centuries. These accounts were often written as trial transcripts testifying to the stalwart faith of the persecuted, who always answered the judge with “I am Christian,” *Christiana/us sum*. These simple documents demonstrated the importance of commitment to the young religion rather than the glorious death of a hero. The development of the *Passio* as a new genre in Christian literature, led to an emphasis on the *gesta*, “deeds” and *passio*, “suffering” of the martyrs rather than their act of defiance to the state. The *Passio Perpetuae* is considered by many to be the first major example of this new genre of literature.<sup>8</sup> This *Passio*, written shortly after the actual event of martyrdom in 203 C.E., is the closest the historian can get to an eyewitness account. A significant portion of the text is even authored by the martyr herself. Naturally, the *Passio Perpetuae* is still crafted to suit its audience; it simply acknowledges that Perpetua herself had a hand in crafting her own narrative. Perpetua is unfortunately the exception that defies the rule. The vast majority of martyrs died many years before the extant written record.

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<sup>7</sup> Castelli, 25.

<sup>8</sup> See, Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete* (London: Cambridge University Press); Thomas Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford University Press, 1992); Paul Monceaux, *Histoire Littéraire de L’Afrique Chrétienne: Depuis les origines jusqu’à l’invasion Arabe, Tome Premier* (Bruxelles: Culture et Civilisation, 1963); For a full discussion of the importance of the *Passio Perpetuae* as a new genre of Christian literature, see Eric Poche, *The Passion Over Perpetua: A New Approach to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (LSU ETD Library, 2009).

Perpetua was a Roman noble woman who lived in the city of Carthage. She was the mother of a newborn child, but she took her baptism into Christianity so seriously that she was willing to reject her role in society as a *matrona* in order to die in defense of her faith. Perpetua was a martyr who was far too realistic to be acceptable to the male-dominated episcopal hierarchy that came to control the orthodox religion after the Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity.<sup>9</sup> She was a Roman matron who had rejected her traditional role in society and even her child for Christianity. A more acceptable female *exemplum* had to be found. The *Passio Perpetuae* portrays the martyr as a proud, outspoken figure, who acted as a leader for her fellow Christians. By the fourth century, even the notion of female church leadership was considered a form of heresy.<sup>10</sup> Perpetua and her followers were also guilty of adopting practices dangerously close to the heretic doctrine known as Montanism.<sup>11</sup> Despite the extreme popularity of this martyr and her cult in North Africa, the major theological authors in Italy during the fourth century, such as Ambrose of Milan, failed to celebrate her feast day or even mention her name. They needed a female martyr whom the women of their day could safely imitate.

Agnes of Rome met all of the necessary criteria. She was a young virgin martyr, who had died at the beginning of the fourth century in the city of Rome itself. Like Perpetua, her cult had flourished and was well known throughout Italy. Unlike Perpetua, Agnes had no one to tell her story. Only a few minor details about her life remained in

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion on the role of women in church hierarchy, see Elizabeth Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Michel Glazier, 1983); Gillian Cloke, *The Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450* (Routledge, 1995)

<sup>10</sup> See Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1994); Frederick C. Klawiter, "The Role of Martyrdom and Persecution in the Development of the Priestly Authority of Women in Early Christianity: A Case Study." *Church History*. vol. 49, no. 3 (1980): 251-261; Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority, and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Rex Butler, *The New Prophecy and 'New Visions': Evidence of Montanism in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (Oxford; BorderStone Press, 2014): 103.

the popular consciousness when the church fathers of the late fourth century began to produce their own written works, extolling her virtues. Lucy Grig notes that the first phase of Agnes' narrative developed at the popular level, out of the hands of any one author: "Agnes herself is constructed by varying traditions. The archaeological evidence for her cult, including the site of her church Sant' Agnese via Nomentana in Rome, pre-dates the literary material. Agnes' story was expounded and expanded, at least initially by oral traditions."<sup>12</sup> The popular Agnes therefore provided the necessary canvas for later authors to shape and manipulate for their own ends.

Although Agnes has garnered some attention in recent years, scholars have not yet come to a consensus on the significance of this particular martyr to the creation of a standardized female martyr text by the early medieval period. Grig describes Agnes as an "archetype" for the virgin martyr, but fails to examine the influence of this archetype in detail. Kate Cooper's thesis on the development of a virgin martyr archetype in the sixth-century *Gesta Martyrum Romanorum* provides a popular alternative to Agnes. Cooper offers evidence to suggest that the *Gesta* adopted their narrative structure from the Hellenistic Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, especially the Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla.<sup>13</sup> These Apocryphal Acts were, in turn, influenced by the popular Hellenistic Romance genre of the second and third centuries: "The Romance of late antiquity takes the form of a Saint's life, in which the chaste desire of the legitimately married hero and heroine has metamorphosed into the otherworldly passion by which a Christian saint embraces a childless death."<sup>14</sup> Due to the influence of the *Gesta* on later hagiography,

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<sup>12</sup> Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London: Duckworth, 2004): 81.

<sup>13</sup> Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Harvard University Press, 1996): 44.

<sup>14</sup> Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 44.

Cooper's hypothesis suggests that Thecla is the idealized archetype for the female saint as early as the sixth century.

Peter Brown appears to support Cooper's thesis in his influential work, *The Body and Society*: "As the rapid growth of her cult shows, Thecla, the imagined inviolate virgin, and not Vibia Perpetua, a real woman and *matronaliter nupta* and the mother of a child, was destined to become the female Saint of the future."<sup>15</sup> Brown's assertion about Thecla is correct to a point. Cooper's work demonstrates a real connection between the Apocryphal acts and the *Gesta Martyrum* as early as the fifth century. However, the Agnes narrative had already been produced by some of the greatest theological minds of the fourth century when these eastern sources finally became popular at Rome.

This dissertation will examine the earliest surviving Agnes sources from the fourth century and place them into their individual historical contexts. This will help establish a chronology for the development of the Agnes narrative, beginning with the oldest source. An analysis of the source material will also help demonstrate the influence of this particular martyr narrative on the narratives of several other noteworthy martyrs, including Agatha of Catania, Lucy of Siracuse, and Eulalia of Merida. A detailed analysis of the *Gesta Agnetis*, an early fifth-century Roman *passio* on the life of the martyr Agnes, will show that many of characteristic elements of the virgin martyr narrative were derived from these fourth-century Agnes texts before Cooper's Hellenistic Romances became popular in the sixth century. The validity of Cooper's work is not in doubt, but the process which transformed the *passions* of ancient female martyrs like Perpetua, into the bland, standardized texts of the early medieval period is a complex one. The importance of these fourth-century Roman sources cannot be overlooked.

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<sup>15</sup> Brown, *Body and Society*, 158.

## THE INFLUENCE OF POPE DAMASUS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AGNES NARRATIVE

If the Agnes narrative began as popular folk tale, its second phase of development can be seen as a response to the popularity of the Agnes cult by patriarchal authority. bishop Damasus of Rome, Bishop Ambrose of Milan and the Iberian poet Prudentius produced a written account of Agnes for a highly literate audience. These first written accounts of Agnes' life credit *fama*, in this case "word of mouth," as their sources.<sup>16</sup> It is this second phase of development which this dissertation focuses on. The development of the Agnes narrative was unusually well documented. Three versions of the Agnes story were produced in close succession to one another, suggesting that the authors of each individual account were aware of and responding to each other. Understanding how and why Agnes was transformed from a popular legend to a symbol of ecclesiastical authority is useful not only to the study of hagiography, but also to the study of the rise of the bishop in late antiquity.

In *The Cult of the Saints*, Peter Brown argues against what he refers to as the "two-tiered" model of religious history. Brown considered this model to be a fundamental bias of the religious historian, which passed into modern scholarship from David Hume's *Natural History of Religion*.<sup>17</sup> According to this model, the emergence of the late antique saint/martyr cult "must have been the result of capitulation by the enlightened elites of the Christian church to modes of thought previously current only among the 'vulgar.'"<sup>18</sup> Brown argues against this simplistic understanding of the

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<sup>16</sup> Grig, 82.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 12-17.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

relationship between “enlightened elite” and “popular religion.” He believes that this two-tiered model must be abandoned in favor of a new approach:

Rather than present the rise of the cult of the saints in terms of a dialogue between two parties, the few and the many, let us attempt to see it as part of a greater whole—the lurching forward of an increasing proportion of late antique society to new forms of reverence.<sup>19</sup>

This study offers a possible solution to Brown’s new, holistic approach to the study of late antique religion. It examines the source material on Agnes not with the understanding of intellectual elites capitulating to popular opinion, but instead as an intermixing of ideas.

Elizabeth Castelli’s model for collective memory will serve as an improved approach to the complex relationships responsible for producing the Agnes narrative. Castelli describes martyrdom as “a form of culture making, whereby Christian identity was indelibly marked by the collective memory of the religious suffering of others.”<sup>20</sup> Martyrdom defines the religion just as the emerging religion defines the martyr. For Castelli, the act of martyrdom is not nearly as important as the memory produced by the community that supported the martyr’s cult: “The notion of collective memory allows one to move past often unresolvable questions of what really happened to questions of how particular ways of construing the past enable later communities to constitute and sustain themselves.”<sup>21</sup> By looking at the historical context of each individual Agnes source, one can see how the author used his source to constitute or shape the surrounding community.

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<sup>19</sup> Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Castelli, 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



Although his or her name is lost to history, the *Passio Perpetuae* had an author: A singular individual who gathered the prison accounts of Perpetua and Saturus and shaped them into the *Passio* as it exists today. Agnes does not have an author, but one figure in particular stands out for being the first to use the memory of the martyr to shape the religious community around him. Pope Damasus is the *auctor*, or in this sense, the “originator” of this idea. This dissertation will demonstrate that his *elogia* served as the inspiration for Ambrose’s *De virginibus* and *Hymni* along with several of the hymns of Prudentius’ *Peristephanon*. Although his influence over the narrative itself was minimal, it must be acknowledged that this narrative would never have taken shape without his *elogium*.

Scholarly opinion on Damasus is somewhat mixed. Since he failed to leave vast volumes of theological writing, like Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine, his memory pales in comparison to these “doctors of the western church.” Dennis Trout considers Damasus’ *elogia* along with his extensive excavation and building at Rome’s most famous martyr sites to be a conscious exercise in “Christianizing” the city of Rome:

Damasus’ invention of early Christian Rome around the tombs of the saints relied as heavily upon remembering as forgetting. Roman heritage, expressed in the phrases and verses of revered poets and in the venerable lexicon of elite commemoration, was at once claimed, manipulated, and transposed in order to make real Romans of the new *patres patriae*.<sup>22</sup>

This reasonably favorable position on Damasus’ contribution to early Christian history only acknowledges part of his contribution. Damasus was an influential bishop who served as a mentor to the young Jerome and a senior advisor to bishop Ambrose.

Damasus’ campaign to redefine Rome’s past as Christian, influenced the production of

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<sup>22</sup> Dennis Trout, “Damasus and the Invention of Early Christian Rome,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, Vol. 33, No.3 (2003): 521.

the Latin Bible and several of Ambrose's most memorable enterprises. He is therefore responsible not only for Christianizing the city of Rome, but also Romanizing western Christianity. This process can, at least in part, be demonstrated by closely examining the relationship between the Agnes texts.

Peter Brown's understanding of Damasus and his building program has changed noticeably over the course of the past few decades. In the *Cult of the Saints*, Brown acknowledges that Damasus has a role in bolstering episcopal authority over the Roman church, describing it as "the most silent and decisive triumph ever won by the bishops of Rome in the late antique period."<sup>23</sup> But this newfound authority should not be confused with the emergence of "papal" authority. In Brown's mind, Damasus was just one bishop among many, perhaps respected for the importance of his see, but nothing more than that. The relationship between Damasus and Ambrose examined in chapter two, offers a different point of view on Damasus' influence throughout western Christendom even at this early date.

Brown's description of Damasus suggests that he considered the bishop's contributions to the martyr cults of ancient Rome to be less significant than Ambrose's *inventio* of Protasius and Gervasius in Milan:

Gervasius and Protasius were inseparably linked to the communal liturgy, in a church built by the bishop, in which the bishop would frequently preside. In that way they would be available to the community as a whole. Ambrose had made the discovery of "use to all," *qui prosint omnibus*.<sup>24</sup>

Although the importance of this particular moment in the history of the martyr cult cannot be overlooked, there is evidence to suggest that Damasus' building programs at

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<sup>23</sup> Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 36.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

Rome served as inspiration for Ambrose's deft political maneuvering during his conflict with the Arian empress Justina in 385-86.

Although Brown grants Damasus a role in the development of episcopal authority in *The Cult of the Saints*, his more recent book, *Through the Eye of the Needle*, downplays Damasus' role in the Christianization of the city: "In writing these verses, Damasus did not nurse the illusion (dear to modern scholars of classical inclination) that by writing Virgilian verse he might somehow swing the mighty Senate to the Christian cause."<sup>25</sup> Damasus' dealings with the aristocracy of Rome have only been marginally addressed thus far. According to Brown, Damasus' endorsement of the Roman martyr cults and his classicized *elogia* only served to strengthen his hold over the Christian community and did not sway the masses of nominally Christian Roman citizens to embrace the religion of Constantine. The anonymously written *Gesta Agnetis* may provide a revised point of view here. This fifth century *passio* portrays Agnes as a Christian hero whose sacrifice helps convert the populace of Rome to Christianity. If this account is at least partially inspired by Damasus, then it must be acknowledged that Damasus at least posthumously courted Rome's nominal Christian converts with his *elogia* and building programs.

Brown tends to discount the role of Damasus in the development of Western Christendom, but he acknowledges at least a minimal role for the bishop. In *The Bone Gatherers*, Nicola Denzey offers an outright disparaging portrayal of the bishop who subverted the female martyr cults of Rome: "If there is a villain in this book—and one

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome and the Making of Christianity, 350-550 AD* (Princeton University Press, 2012): 253.

period in which things changed—it would be the ruthless visionary Pope Damasus.”<sup>26</sup> Denzey considers Damasus to be the primary culprit behind what she terms as the “masculinization” of Rome’s martyr cults. His commemorations and renovations of church property focused almost entirely on Rome’s male martyrs, leaving Agnes and Basilla unaltered due to their popularity.<sup>27</sup> She believes that Damasus effectively “left Agnes alone,” because of the popularity of her cult and its association with both the Constantinian dynasty and his rival Ursinus: “As a Virgin martyr, Agnes stood alone as a powerful iconic figure. It was a power which Damasus might yield without losing any of his own.”<sup>28</sup> This position is interesting, but it seems to overemphasize the role of the popular martyr cult in establishing Agnes’ narrative. Damasus did not ignore Agnes, he used her as a template to subordinate the female martyr cult under his authority. This was the purpose of his *elogium* and it was the success of this process, which inspired Ambrose to shape her narrative to suit his own purposes.

Both Denzey and Brown acknowledge that Damasus, who came to power during a factional rivalry with an anti-pope Ursinus, exercised a degree of influence over the growing episcopal authority of the bishop of Rome. But in their estimations, the bishop of Rome was nothing more than one bishop among many. While bishop Damasus exercised none of the political dominance of medieval papacy, his papacy was an important step towards the evolution of this medieval institution. This dissertation aims to demonstrate that Damasus’ influence over the Agnes narrative provides at least some evidence for the development of what one might call “papal authority” during the reign of Damasus.

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<sup>26</sup> Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007): 176.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

Authority and political power are nevertheless two distinct entities. The presence of one does not prove the existence of the other. The rising political power of the papacy by the year 800 would have been impossible without the concrete establishment of authority by the fifth century. In order to understand this complex process and Damasus' role in it, an examination of development of Papal authority will be necessary.

## THE EVOLUTION OF PAPAL AUTHORITY

The papacy has traditionally been viewed as a distinct political entity after the reign of Pope Leo I. This Leo is also remembered as Leo the Great primarily because he is most often associated with the famous petrine doctrine, a statement made to the council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E., affirming the papal primacy through a connection to the first bishop of Rome—the apostle Peter. Walter Ullman emphasizes the revolutionary nature of this “victory” over eastern Christendom:

The council rose in unison acclaiming the declaration by the famous words ‘Saint Peter speaks through Leo.’ This was a triumph which no other pope had earned or received – the argumentation in this work of Leo’s raised him some 1300 years later to the rank of ‘Doctor of the Church.’<sup>29</sup>

This point of view originates from the early twentieth-century German historian Erich Caspar, who examined claims to papal primacy extensively in his *Geschichte des Papsttums*.<sup>30</sup> According to this branch of scholarship, the papacy of Leo I serves as the beginning not only for the papacy’s ideological claims to primacy in the church but also to the formation of a papal government in Italy at the expense of Byzantine rule.

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<sup>29</sup> Walter Ullman, *A Short History of the Papacy in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen and Company Ltd., 1972): 25.

<sup>30</sup> Erich Caspar, *Geschichte des Papsttums von den Anfängen bis zur Höhe der Weltherrschaft* (Tübingen, 1933)

Ullman offers a clarification of this traditional branch of scholarship originally promoted by Caspar. Rather than simply associating the rise of papal political power in the west with the revolutionary actions of Leo the Great, Ullman considers what he calls “papal monarchy” as an evolutionary process beginning with Pope Damasus in the late fourth century and culminating in the reign of Pope Leo I. According to Ullman, the petrine doctrine was set into motion by Pope Damasus as early as 382 C.E. when he asserted the apostolic origin of papal authority: “The council held in Rome in 382 declared that the Roman church was not set up by any synodal decrees (a bold hit at the council of Constantinople), but was founded by two apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul.”<sup>31</sup> This places the origin of papal primacy nearly seventy years earlier than the council of Chalcedon. Leo is still accorded an important and decisive role in promoting papal primacy. His greatest achievement was not the invention of the petrine doctrine but the refinement of it. Rather than simply associate himself with apostle Peter, Leo advanced the notion that the papal office was itself apostolic:

The great advance of this Leonine theme lay in the separation of the (objective) office of the pope (which was the same as St. Peter’s) from the (subjective) personality of the pope... the pope as office holder continued the legal personality of the first pope, with the consequence that, in his function as pope, no pope followed his immediate predecessor but St. Peter directly.<sup>32</sup>

It is this achievement, in Ullman’s mind, which makes pope Leo I one of the great doctors of the Church.<sup>33</sup> The other major achievement was that Leo I succeeded in gaining support at Chalcedon thus establishing a legal precedent for papal primacy.

This point of view remained the dominant one in papal scholarship until the rise of late antique studies in the 1970s. Peter Brown and the scholars who followed him

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<sup>31</sup> Ullman, *A Short History*, 10.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

challenged the notion of a decisive political break between the East and the West in the fifth century. The entire corpus of Brown's work in some way deals with the development of a distinctly Western brand of Christianity. After all, a "late antiquity" cannot be properly defined without also defining what succeeded it. His most comprehensive treatment of this particular issue can be found in the *The Rise of Western Christendom*:

The bishop of Rome was called *papa*. The word meant "grand old man." The word pope comes from this courtesy title. But a *papa* of the fifth century was in no way a "pope" as modern persons know him, as the undisputed head of the worldwide Roman Catholic Church.<sup>34</sup>

Brown emphasizes that the supposed "acceptance" of the petrine doctrine in the east at the council of Chalcedon in 451 does not mark the beginning of a distinct political entity in the west. According to Brown, the Latin bishop of Rome was simply the most important religious figure in the increasingly marginalized west. From the point of view of Constantinople, Rome was simply a relic of bygone days. This made the bishop of Rome an influential arbitrator rather than an authoritative decider: "The very fact that, as a Latin, Leo appeared slightly as an outsider to the Greek world gave him, in fact, a considerable advantage. His authority could be appealed to as a 'tie-breaker.'"<sup>35</sup> Brown is perhaps at his best when he emphasizes an eastern point of view to a western audience with traditionally western biases.

The emphasis on Leo in western scholarship is not difficult to understand. In addition to the council of Chalcedon, one other event made Leo "great." He was said to

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom, second edition* (Oxford: Blackweel Publishing, 1996): 114.

<sup>35</sup> Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 114.

have confronted Attila the Hun and protected the city of Rome from invasion.<sup>36</sup> At the very least pope Leo held a diplomatic position in Italy if not a political one. He did this out of necessity more than out of a desire to expand his political influence. The eastern emperor had bigger things to worry about in the east and the pope was the only one available to protect the old capital. Leo lived through the sack of Rome by the Visigoths and later presided as pope during the Vandal invasion in 455. These troubled times led bishops like Leo to consolidate and fortify the Catholic faith throughout the western world. The bravery of these figures gave hope to beleaguered Roman citizens, Christian and pagan alike. Brown argues that these hardships gave rise to Catholicism as a distinct Roman identity:

Leo I (440-461), the first pope to come from the old-fashioned countryside of Rome, praised Rome as the see of St. Peter in language that echoes exactly the punctilious devotion of Symmachus to the Capitoline gods. In a world increasingly conscious of the presence of the non-Roman, Catholicism had become the single “Roman” religion.<sup>37</sup>

Not just the pope but all of the bishops of the west became defenders of *Romanitas* in the face of Germanic and Hunnic invasion. Yet they did not achieve this alone. They derived their authority through the connection with the divine by means of local patron saints. Brown illustrates this relationship with Perpetuus the bishop of Tours and his patronage of the tomb of Martin of Tours:

In the 460s, imperial rule was perceived to have no further chance of asserting itself north of the Loire. Yet it was precisely at that time that the somewhat unprepossessing tomb of Saint Martin at Tours was given increasing prominence by Perpetuus.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ullman, *A Short History*, 4-27.

<sup>37</sup> Brown, *Western Christendom*, 126.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.



The development of local shrines and pilgrimage gave cohesion to a new type of Roman empire held together by saints and bishops rather than emperors and magistrates.

Brown paints a picture of Roman continuity until the seventh century but changes nevertheless occurred regardless of whether or not Christians in the west still identified themselves as Romans. The papacy acted in defense of the peoples of Italy just as other bishops did in other parts of the western world. This does not mean that their newfound authority translated directly into political power. Furthermore, there is still no evidence to suggest that Leo was acting in any way different from bishops like Perpetuus at Tours. The authority of these figures developed out of necessity. It only translated to a desire for power when the necessity was no longer present.

Jeffrey Richards responds to the traditionalist view of the papacy more directly in *The Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*. Richards chastises western scholarship which ignores the ideological context for important developmental events in papal history: “This has resulted in a one-sided view of papal history in which certain periods, indeed whole centuries, have been down-graded because they are not eras of ‘significant ideological advance.’”<sup>39</sup> For Richards, the period in question is the so-called “Byzantine Captivity” of the papacy, lasting from 554 to 751. This time period is traditionally viewed as a period when weak and ineffectual popes ruled over Rome as transparent representatives of Byzantine authority rather than unique political actors like Leo I. This assessment of the papacy implies that the bishopric of Rome had fully established its unique governing role over the city of Rome and other parts of Italy once Byzantium had lost its direct line to the west with the rise of the Ostrogothic government in northern Italy. Once Justinian had reestablished direct control over Italy, the papacy

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<sup>39</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *The Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1979): 1.

was seen as a political rival which needed to be dominated directly by the eastern emperor.

Richards considers the development of a papal government in the fifth century to be anachronistic if not blatantly wrong. He takes particular exception to Walter Ullman's use of the term "papal monarchy." According to Richards, the early medieval papacy had an unbroken ideology throughout the periods in question: "The papacy of course had an ideology, but it was an ideology that had been arrived at by the opening date of this study, was not departed from during the period covered and in particular not in the direction of papal monarchy."<sup>40</sup> Richards believes that the ideological context for this debate centers on the increasingly distorted position of *Romanitas* and *Christianitas*.<sup>41</sup> The early popes interceded forcefully in doctrinal matters but never abandoned their traditional place as dedicated members of the Roman empire now stationed in the east.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless Richards admits that papal ideology focused itself exhaustively on papal primacy in theological matters. The council of Chalcedon is the perfect example. The historical context for this eastern council meeting in 451 C.E. had little to do with the West and much more to do with the East. It was an attempt to establish a definitive ruling on the monophysite heresy. In the 430s, Cyril the patriarch of Alexandria had argued against the monophysite position held by Nestorius the patriarch of Constantinople. This reignited age-old debate on the nature of Christ thought to have been put to rest at Nicaea in 325.<sup>43</sup> The problem lay in the east, but the papacy felt compelled to involve itself

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<sup>40</sup>Richards, *The Popes and the Papacy*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-8.

<sup>43</sup> Brown, *Western Christendom*, 116-122.

anyway as a way of establishing its primacy. Richards summarizes this position by examining the psychological motivations behind the ideology of papal primacy:

For all its battery of claims – the keys of the kingdom, the petrine commission, double apostolic foundation and the rest – there remains the suspicion that for an institution as rooted in the psyche and the traditions of the Roman world as the papacy was there could be no real peace of mind until Rome was once again the capital of the Roman empire.

Even if the pope was not directly involved in politics before the eighth century, few would argue that there was not an underlying political motivation as well.

Leo enjoyed a degree of independence in Italy because of the tumultuous nature of the fifth century, but never failed to recognize the eastern emperor as the supreme temporal authority of his day. Ullman credits Gelasius I with taking the next natural step in the direction towards a “papal monarchy.”<sup>44</sup> Unlike Leo, who held the see when Byzantine control was intermittent at best, Gelasius I became pope under the rule of Theodoric the Great, the Ostrogothic king famous for unifying his kingdom of northern Italy with the approval of the eastern emperor Zeno. Although the situation was far from ideal, it did allow for uninterrupted communication between Rome and Constantinople. Gelasius and his predecessor Felix III became infamous in eastern eyes for their role in the Acacian schism. Acacius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, had persuaded Zeno to issue a document known as the *Henotikon*. The *Henotikon* was an attempt to end monophysitism completely by directly condemning Nestorius and reaffirming the twelve anathemas of Cyril of Alexandria. From a theological perspective, this document was a reaffirmation of Leo’s achievement at Chalcedon, but Felix III objected to it for another reason entirely. The emperor had issued the *Henotikon* completely on his own. No synods were called; no councils were convened. The emperor had subsumed the sacred duty of

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<sup>44</sup> Ullman, *A Short History*, 30-31.

bishops. He had also completely undermined papal primacy. Felix III responded by excommunicating Acacius and the ensuing dispute lasted until his successor Gelasius took over in 492 C.E. Gelasius I responded with a now famous letter to the new emperor Anastasius I, which reaffirmed papal primacy. Traditional scholars like Ullman and Caspar also claim that this letter also gives the pope political authority over the emperor himself, thus making the papal office an important if silent partner in the governance of the empire.

This famous letter, known as the *Duo Sunt* for the passage in question, claims as its title implies that there are two powers governing the world:

Indeed, august emperor, there are two powers by which this world is primarily governed: the sacred authority of the pontificate and kingly power.

*Duo quippe sunt, imperator Auguste, quibus principaliter mundus hic regitur: auctoritas sacra pontificum, et regalis potestas.*<sup>45</sup>

This statement has been the focus of scholarly attention for more than a century. Caspar cites it first, making the obvious comparison to the *Res Gestae divi Augusti* of emperor Augustus: “Mit auctoritas bezeichnete Augustus in seinem berühmten Rechenschaftsbericht das, worin er als princeps allen voranstehe während er potestas nicht mehr als seine Amtskollegen gehabt habe.”<sup>46</sup> Ullman develops this ideal even further in his own work. He sees this as a direct claim to political *auctoritas* as well, even though Gelasius makes it clear from his use of the adjective *sacra* that he is referring to sacred authority as opposed to temporal authority:

*Auctoritas* as claimed by the papacy from now onwards meant the faculty of laying down in a binding manner the fundamental guide lines that were to direct Christian society. That was the idea behind the (Roman) concept of the

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<sup>45</sup> J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Linguae Latinae Cursus Completus, tomus 59* (Paris, 1862): 42.

<sup>46</sup> Caspar, *Geschichte*, 65-66.

*principatus* of the Roman church which itself was the constitutional term for Roman monarchy.<sup>47</sup>

Thus the traditional point of view is that Gelasius, in defense of what Leo established at Chalcedon, issued a letter to the emperor in which he claimed to be the one true *princeps* of the Roman world, whose “authority,” or *auctoritas* outweighed the emperor’s “power,” or *potestas*.

Other scholars have reacted against this position. Francis Dvornik examines this letter at great length in effort to understand its impact on the development of medieval political thought. Dvornik notes that that from a Roman legal standpoint, *potestas* outweighed *auctoritas*: “It was the *potestas* that mattered most, for it sprang from the sovereignty of the Roman people, who during the republican period delegated it to the magistrates for the length of their tenure in office.”<sup>48</sup> *Auctoritas* was understood as an indirect form of influence. This influence had to be recognized by the holder of the *potestas* due to respect for social position or tradition, whether it stemmed from the Senate, the *collegia* or the *princeps*.<sup>49</sup> According to Dvornik this understanding of the relationship between the two would still be widely understood in fifth-century Byzantium.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, Gelasius was not radically altering the political thought of his day. Dvornik nonetheless recognizes a more subtle alteration than the one suggested by Caspar and Ullman: “What was really new—in fact, a turning point in the history of Christian political thought—was the contrast between the ecclesiastical *auctoritas* and the

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<sup>47</sup> Ullman, *A Short History*, 32.

<sup>48</sup> Francis Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy, Origin and Background* (Glückstadt: J.J. Augustin, 1966): 806.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 806.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

imperial *potestas*, with the proviso that the world was governed by both.”<sup>51</sup> Regardless of how the papacy exercised its power to rule, no one can dispute that Gelasius was claiming at least some share in the rule of the empire with the above statement, *duo sunt... regalis potestas*.

Jeffrey Richards also addresses the debate centered on this particular letter. According to Richards, scholars on both sides of the debate have credited the letter with too much importance, ignoring the context for the letter itself. It was written to emperor Anastasius during the Acacian schism, which happened in response to the promulgation of the *Henotikon* by his predecessor Zeno. According to Richards, Gelasius simply wants to explain that the temporal office of emperor has interfered in a theological matter best left in the hands of the church. The letter comes across as a grab for political power only because Gelasius made a habit of pushing things too far with rhetorical flourish: “This letter is haughty and high-handed, but that was the nature of this particular pope.”<sup>52</sup> He cites A.K. Ziegler’s article on the letter, which makes similar claims about Gelasius’ writing style: “A.K. Ziegler has suggested that it is merely a rhetorical device to avoid using the same word twice, and he quotes a letter written by Gelasius for Felix III in which he is clearly using *potestas* and *auctoritas* as synonyms.”<sup>53</sup> In his translations of Gelasius’ letters, Ziegler often translates both *auctoritas* and *potestas* loosely as “power.”<sup>54</sup> By doing so he inadvertently draws attention to the one word that has been ignored up to this point. Caspar, Ullman, and Dvornik get so caught up in the nature of *potestas* and *auctoritas* that they ignore the *sacra* clearly modifying *auctoritas*. Gelasius

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<sup>51</sup> Dvornik, 807.

<sup>52</sup> Richards, *The Popes and the Papacy*, 22.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>54</sup> Aloysius K. Ziegler, “Pope Gelasius I and his Teaching on the Relation of Church and State,” *Catholic Historical Review* Vol. 27, No. 4 (Jan., 1942): 412-437.

clearly states that his power lies in sacred matters alone, while the temporal realm is left to the *regalis potestas* of the emperor. In his mind, he was not encroaching on the emperor's right to rule the empire. The emperor was encroaching on his right to govern the church.

This debate cannot be adequately resolved without considering the source which Gelasius was undoubtedly citing when he wrote the letter. The *Res Gestae divi Augusti* is a supposedly autobiographical account of the achievements of Rome's first emperor. In this highly loaded piece of propaganda, Augustus explains that he did not come to power through extra-constitutional means, "I refused to take anything given against the traditions of our ancestors," *παρα τα πατρ(ια) ε(θ)η διδομενην ανεδεξαμην*.<sup>55</sup> He goes on to identify the office by which he ruled the empire: "I have been *princeps senatus*, up to the day on which I have written this, for forty years." *Princeps senatus fui usque ad eum diem, quo scripseram haec per annos quadraginta*.<sup>56</sup> His ability to rule over the Roman empire did not stem from the consular imperium, which he only possessed when he served as consul, but through the *auctoritas* of his position as *princeps*. The title of *princeps* was traditionally given to the oldest senator out of respect. It accorded that senator the right to speak first. Augustus created an office with such *auctoritas* that once he had spoken no other Senator would dare contradict. From a historical standpoint Gelasius' claim to *auctoritas* cannot be ignored. Although the emperor held the *potestas* or power of office, he had to defer to the Pope's superior *auctoritas* in much the same way a consul or senator did under the rule of Augustus. Of course, this *auctoritas* was

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<sup>55</sup> E. Capps, ed. *Velleius Paterculus and Res Gestae divi Augusti* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1924): 354.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

only “sacred authority,” *auctoritas sacra*. Thus, the Pope was only superior in theological matters, like the Acacian schism.

A discussion of the development of papal primacy would not be complete without also mentioning Pope Gregory I. Gregory I, like Leo I, is called “Great” due to his enormous influence on the development of medieval Christianity. He is considered one of the four doctors of the western church because of the impact of his prolific body of writing which helped define how a papal government was to be administered. Yet to call his papacy a government would perhaps be stretching his influence too far. Ullman considers Gregory one of the principal actors in developing a papal monarchy in the west: “Towards the Western Rulers Gregory spoke the language of Roman governor who gave orders, commanded and expected the execution of his orders by those whom he called son.”<sup>57</sup> Richards admits that Gregory referred to the papal see as the *princeps Apostolorum* no fewer than fifty eight times in his letters.<sup>58</sup> Ullman hails him as the “Father of Europe,” the man who gave the Germanic kingdoms their Roman backbone:

Taking their ideas [Leo I and Gelasius I] as a basis however Gregory made the revolutionary break to the Germanic peoples. And it was to be the Union of Latin Rome with the unsophisticated Germanic nations which was to yield that Europe of which the spiritual parent was Gregory the Great.<sup>59</sup>

There can be little doubt that Gregory was a ruler, but the nature of that rule is still open to debate. Gregory had no standing army to control and his correspondence with the eastern emperor never deviates from that of a loyal subject.

Ullman admits that Gregory avoided open political conflict with the emperor: “While the idea of the papal *principatus* was in the foreground in Gregory’s dealings with

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<sup>57</sup> Ullman, *A Short History*, 57.

<sup>58</sup> Richards, *Consul of God*, 64.

<sup>59</sup> Ullman, *A Short History*, 58.



Western governments, not once did the term appear in all his official communications with the imperial government.”<sup>60</sup> Richards explains that Gregory saw himself as an integral part of the empire, a subordinate arm used to govern the west for the emperor.<sup>61</sup> For Richards, this is the significance of the epitaph on Gregory’s tomb: *Consul Dei*, or “Consul of God.” In Byzantine terms, the consul was an administrator second only the emperor himself. It is interesting to note that this position suggests that this sixth-century pope ruled with *political* authority over Italy, even if he did so as a subordinate to the Emperor. At this point the papal see was something more than a bishopric. It is nevertheless clear that Gregory had influence over the Latin West that far surpassed that of the eastern emperor. This influence derived from the *spiritual* authority of his office. This is perhaps why he saw fit to refer to himself as a *princeps*, a figure who rules by virtue of authority alone.

Although the notion of papal primacy seems to have been developed in the fifth century, there is little evidence for a fully developed papal government. The real achievement of Leo and Gelasius was the formation of a dualistic understanding of rule separated into two distinct branches of government. The papacy was the supreme authority in the spiritual realm while the emperor was the supreme authority over the temporal realm. The emperor never formally accepted this idea and Gelasius did not even succeed at ending the schism. Once Justinian I reclaimed northern Italy in 540, the pope’s activities were restricted by the exarch of Ravenna. The first actual political power exercised by the pope seems to originate in the eighth century in response to the volatility of the Lombards and the inability of the exarchate of Ravenna to adequately respond to

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<sup>60</sup> Ullman, *A Short History*, 57.

<sup>61</sup> Richards, *Consul of God*, 62-69.

the threat. It is during this time period that a papal state can be said to come into existence for the first time. How and when this new form of government takes shape is nevertheless an area of much debate.

Thomas Noble examines the issue thoroughly in *The Republic of Saint Peter*. In his opinion, the papacy formed its own distinct government over what was left of the Byzantine Duchy of Rome as early as 738. It was in this year that the Lombard King Liutprand attacked and conquered the city of Ravenna forcing the Byzantine exarch into exile. Pope Gregory II responded to this attack not by appealing to the Byzantine emperor but by asking for aid from Ursus of Venice and Antonio of Grado. In addition to this he referred to the area under his protection not as the Duchy of Rome but as the “Holy Republic.”<sup>62</sup> Noble considers this statement to be a monumental turn in both Italian and papal history: “The pope, with the Italian nobility arrayed behind him, had thrown off almost every vestige of imperial authority, and the Basileus had recognized the new ordering of affairs by reorganizing territories where his power was still effective.”<sup>63</sup> Together with these two allies this new “Holy Republic” won back Ravenna, but only for a short time. After a short period of inactivity, Liutprand began to make advances once again on the Duchies of the South. At this point, the pope decided to appeal to a new potential ally.

Pope Gregory II wrote a letter asking for immediate aid for Rome not from the Byzantine emperor, but from Charles Martel, the Frankish *maiordomo* now famous for dealing with the Muslim threat at Tours in 732. Noble points out a number of characteristics found in this letter to Charles Martel which in his mind prove that Gregory

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas Noble, *The Republic of Saint Peter* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984): 41-2.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

II now saw the “Republic of Saint Peter” as a distinct political entity which was under his sole protection.<sup>64</sup> Noble notes that this was the first time in which the pope referred to the Duchy as Saint Peter’s “peculiar people,” *peculiarem populum*.<sup>65</sup> He sees this term as a significant piece of evidence: “What is interesting, then, is the fact that “*peculiaris*” derives from the same Latin root as ‘*pecus*’ which means a flock or herd. Another related word ‘*peculium*,’ means one’s private property.”<sup>66</sup> Noble also notes that the letter to Charles Martel says nothing about the exarch of Ravenna, the figure he would normally turn to in times of need: “The Pope wrote like a head of state seeking a defensive alliance. Not once in his letter did Gregory mention the emperor or the exarch.”<sup>67</sup> Charles Martel had just concluded an alliance with Liutprand and help was not forthcoming. Noble nevertheless stands by his claim that the pope began to represent Rome as its leader from this point on.

Noble’s theory places the date for a distinct papal state about one generation before it is generally accepted as reality. His reason for offering this revision to papal history stems from a dissatisfaction with the way the papacy is viewed in the formation of the papal state. Most scholars fall into one of two branches, placing emphasis on either Byzantine or Frankish factors which led to the development of the papal state. Both of these branches tend to subordinate the papacy to a more powerful external force. As a result Noble considers them flawed because they fail to recognize internal developments happening in Italy well before the reign of Pepin. According to Noble, the Byzantine

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<sup>64</sup> Noble, *The Republic of Saint Peter*, 40-46.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

view treats Italian history as “a mere annex of Byzantine history” which fails to account for changes in Italian society:

It [the Byzantine view] ignores, or insufficiently appreciates, a long and remarkably consistent set of deliberate, calculated steps taken in Italy to throw off the Byzantine yoke and to replace it with a different kind of rule at the hands of new masters.<sup>68</sup>

Noble also considers the Frankish view to have similar faults: “The Frankish view, in its first manifestation, tends to ignore what has been going on in Italy for a half-century before Pepin set foot across the Alps.”<sup>69</sup> It is less important to find out when the papacy became a distinct political entity than it is to discover how. A review of both the Frankish and Byzantine views mentioned by Noble will be helpful.

The Frankish view originates with Louis Halphen’s *Charlemagne and the Carolingian Empire*. According to Halphen, Pepin is the political figure chiefly responsible for the foundation of the papal state. Halphen portrays Pepin as a hero working to free the helpless papacy from the Lombards. As a result of this, Pope Stephen II is portrayed as defenseless and passive. When speaking of Stephen’s appeal to Pepin for aid against the Lombard King Aistulf, Halphen frames their relationship in the following way: “It was obvious that for the defenseless pope the situation was serious, and that if Pepin really wished to save Rome from Lombard capture he could not delay his return to Italy.”<sup>70</sup> This point of view is not without its basis in fact. Pepin has the army and the pope does not. Pope Stephen II nevertheless had more influence on matters than is being indicated. The Donation of Pepin should be proof enough of this. The pope used the authority of his position as a spiritual leader of the western world to justify the

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<sup>68</sup> Noble, *The Republic of Saint Peter*, xxii.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv.

<sup>70</sup> Louis Halphen, *Charlemagne and the Carolingian Empire*, Giselle de Nie, trans. (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1977): 30.

new Carolingian dynasty in the first place. Why else would a military commander be so willing to cede captured territory to a mere bishop? Noble considers the Donation of Pepin to be an act of fiction: “Pepin was not asked by the Pope to create anything. He was asked to defend something, namely, the republic, which was already in existence.”<sup>71</sup> Regardless of whether or not one accepts Noble’s chronology for these events, it must be accepted that Pepin considered the pope an authoritative figure; otherwise, he would have felt no need to surrender the newly acquired territory to the papacy.

The Byzantine view is equally flawed. The classic point of view for Byzantine historians is the one expressed by George Ostrogorsky in his *History of the Byzantine State*. According to Ostrogorsky, the split between Rome and Constantinople started with Emperor Leo III’s rise to power. Leo justified his rise to power by claiming that his Isaurian dynasty held the divine right to rule. As a result, he actively promoted reform of orthodox institutions and theology. He came into direct conflict with the western world over the issue of iconoclasm, a belief that all icons and images of holy figures were fundamentally sinful and must be abandoned. According to Ostrogorsky, Pope Gregory II disagreed with Leo on this theological matter but was careful to avoid contending with him politically: “Though Gregory II turned down the iconoclast overtures of the Emperor in an unusually caustic manner, he strove to avoid any breach with Byzantium.”<sup>72</sup> Once again the pope is portrayed as a comparatively weak and passive figure. Ostrogorsky only recognizes an official break between Rome and Constantinople with the promulgation of an iconoclasm edict to the west in 730. But the Pope was not reacting to an attack on western icons, he was asserting his own preeminent authority over spiritual matters. Leo

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<sup>71</sup> Halphen, *Charlemagne*, xxiv.

<sup>72</sup> George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, Joan Hussey, trans. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968): 163.

III was guilty of breaching that duality of rule established as far back as Gelasius I. Much like Zeno, Leo III had overstepped his boundaries as a temporal ruler and it was the pope's job as a spiritual leader of the Christian world to prevent this. This is why Noble has found evidence for the formation of a papal republic as early as the pontificate of Gregory II and not with the more formal condemnation of Gregory III.

The debate on papal monarchy does not end in the eighth century. A number of thirteenth-century scholars reject the notion that a papal state even existed after the Donations of Pepin and Constantine. Daniel Waley demonstrates that these documents were ignored even by Charlemagne's sons: "As early as 824 Lothair's *Constitutio Romana* placed supreme justice in Rome itself in the hands of two *missi*, one papal and the other imperial."<sup>73</sup> Peter Partner credits the birth of the papal state to the brilliant political maneuvering of Pope Innocent III after the death of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI in 1198. According to Partner, Innocent seized the opportunity to reassert the age old Donation of Constantine during a bout of anti-imperial sentiment in northern Italy.<sup>74</sup> This opinion of papal government is based on a very literal interpretation of political power. Waley and Partner are unable to credit the papacy with rule of a papal state without direct control over typical government structures, like a standing military or administration. No one would ever deny that the papacy had exercised political influence on all the highest levels European government by the thirteenth century. Perhaps measuring the papacy against other political offices like monarchy is not the best way of understanding how it ruled.

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<sup>73</sup> Daniel Waley, *The Papal State in the Thirteenth Century* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1961): 2.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Partner, *The Lands of Saint Peter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972): 230-35.

The argument centered on when the papacy became a literal political force is academic and far less significant than the other issue prevalent throughout this entire debate—the nature of papal power itself. Whether or not one calls it monarchy, the papacy commanded the Roman Catholic world with the authority of a monarch. This authority was derived from two important places: Roman tradition and apostolic primacy. Popes throughout the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries used Rome’s glorious past along with preeminence of the apostle Peter to demonstrate that the papal see was more than just a bishopric, or even a patriarchate. In order to achieve this goal, the papacy allied itself very closely with Apostle Peter as well as the most popular martyr cults of the western empire. Late antique bishops derived their own local authority through association with martyr relics. The papacy did the same thing but on a massive scale. It achieved this goal by figuratively becoming the earthly manifestation of Saint Peter. The development of the Agnes story will demonstrate how the papacy cultivated this association in the minds and hearts of its Roman followers, as early as the fourth century when the Roman empire was still very much a reality.

#### DEVELOPING A NARRATIVE TO BOLSTER AUTHORITY

George Demacopoulos offers a new interpretation to this long debate over the evolution of papal primacy in *The Invention of Saint Peter*. According to Demacopoulos, Papal primacy stemmed from the increasing authority exercised by the Popes of the fifth and sixth centuries. These Popes, particularly Leo I and Gregory the Great, built up their authority by emphasizing their close association with the cult of Saint Peter in Rome. Demacopoulos describes Damasus as the earliest figure to cultivate this association: “Damasus’ tenure serves as a case study of the way Roman bishops appropriated the

enthusiasm for martyr cult for their own initiatives to root out rival factions through a reframing of Rome's Christian history."<sup>75</sup> Demacopoulos thus establishes that Damasus' patronage of the Saint Peter's martyr cult at Rome laid some of the fundamental ground work for later claims to papal authority. This dissertation will argue that Damasus' patronage of Agnes cult was also an important part of this process. Chapter 1 will demonstrate that Agnes served as the precursor to Damasus' entire patronage program. If Damasus had not achieved early success with his renovation of Santa Costanza, it is unlikely that his building program would have been extended to other important sites of Rome.

Chapters 2 and 3 will focus on the *De virginibus* and the Agnes hymn written by Ambrose. Chapter 2 will examine the relationship between Ambrose and Damasus. Due to his aristocratic background and family connections at Rome, Ambrose was particularly well connected with the city of Rome at the beginning of his tenure at Milan. The relationship between Ambrose and the senior bishop of Rome was an important component in the development of *De virginibus* and the hymn *Agnes Beatae Virginis*. A close examination of this hymn along with several other noteworthy Ambrosian hymns will help demonstrate that the Damasan *elogium* to Agnes served as inspiration for Ambrose's *inventio* of Protasius and Gervasius.

Chapter 4 will look closely at the *Peristephanon* and trace its use of sources. Prudentius employed both Damasan and Ambrosian versions of the Agnes story, often manipulating them and adding his own material. By exploring the nature of the source material and the significance of Prudentius' *iterarium* to the city of Rome in the work

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<sup>75</sup> George Demacopoulos, *The Invention of Peter: Apostolic Discourse and Papal Authority in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013): 36.



itself, it will be established that Damasus' *elogium* and building program had a great deal of influence on the Spanish poet, offering proof that Damasus' authority, at least as a source on early Christianity, extended far beyond the walls of Rome itself.

The conclusion will examine the relationship between these earlier fourth century sources and the fifth century *Gesta Martyrum Romanorum*. This collection of martyr passions, written by anonymous authors who were often identified with significant bishops, like Ambrose or Maximus of Turin, demonstrates the authoritative nature of the fourth-century texts as sources for later hagiography.

## CHAPTER 2: *FAMA REFERT*: DAMASUS AND THE ROMANIZATION OF THE CHURCH

The earliest written account of the martyr Agnes is an *elogium* written by Pope Damasus to commemorate a church built by the emperor Constantine's daughter.<sup>76</sup> This short *elogium*, made up of only ten lines of Virgilian style dactylic hexameter, is often disregarded in favor of the lengthier accounts of the loftier literary figures of Ambrose and Prudentius which followed it. This small piece of poetry nevertheless came first and had a profound influence on virgin martyr hagiography, serving as both a precursor to Ambrose and a model of inspiration for Prudentius' *Peristephanon*. Yet Damasus' contribution to hagiography can only be understood when viewed along with the dramatic career of this peculiar Roman bishop. Damasus served the Roman church at an unusual time. It was a time in which the Roman church no longer had to fear the direct threat of persecution, but still had to contend with powerful pagan opposition as well as an unprecedented level of factional strife. An examination of this poem along with other significant *elogia* will demonstrate how Damasus used the popularity of Roman martyr cults to transform his beleaguered bishopric into one of the most influential offices in Christendom.

Agnes as an *exemplum* of virginity is often overshadowed by another prominent female example of Christian chastity, the Seleucian ascetic Thecla. Peter Brown begins *Body and Society*, his comprehensive study on virginity and feminine identity, with a quote from the *Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*.<sup>77</sup> This demonstrates the influence he finds this particular saint to have on the early Christian perception of virginity. He later

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<sup>76</sup> Kate Cooper and Julia Hillner, eds., *Religion, Dynasty and Patronage in Early Christian Rome* (Cambridge University Press, 2007): 12.

<sup>77</sup> Peter Brown, *Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988): 158.

describes the influence which Thecla has on female hagiographical tradition: “As the rapid growth of her cult shows, Thecla, the imagined inviolate virgin, and not Vibia Perpetua, a real woman, *matronaliter nupta* and the mother of a child, was destined to become the female saint of the future.”<sup>78</sup> This status is impressive not only because Thecla is fictional, but also because she never actually achieves martyrdom in the *Apocryphal Acts*. Brown makes this particular observation to emphasize that a fictional virgin had more value to early Christian theologians than a popular real life figure. By the fifth century, Perpetua’s cult was well established in North Africa but poorly known elsewhere. In contrast, the *Apocryphal Acts* appear to have directly influenced the writers of several other martyr *Actae* and *Passiones*, including the first actual virgin martyr Agnes. Agnes and many of the virgin martyr tales which follow seem to adopt key elements from the story of Thecla. Common to all is the renunciation of a suitor in order to preserve chastity and subsequent punishment by that suitor in the form of imprisonment and attempted execution.

The connection between the *Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* and virgin martyr hagiography has been examined at great length by Kate Cooper. Cooper considers the *Apocryphal Acts* to be a Christian response to the prolific ancient Romance genre:

If the parallelism between the *Apocryphal Acts* and the ancient Romances is intentional—and surely it must be—than the rejection of the Romance’s ideal of passionate marriage was also a response to the Romance’s call for renewal of city.<sup>79</sup>

This helps explain why eroticism is commonly employed to characterize the outwardly ascetic relationship between Paul and Thecla in the *Apocryphal Acts*. According to Cooper, this erotic imagery is later adopted in female martyr hagiography to characterize

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<sup>78</sup> Brown, *Body and Society*, 158.

<sup>79</sup> Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 24.

the female ascetic/martyr's relationship to the apostle. Cooper demonstrates this connection using the corpus of literature commonly known as the *Gesta Martyrum Romanorum*: "Although the *Gesta Martyrum* mimic the content of the pre-Constantinian martyr *Acta* they are closer to the Christian Romance genre exemplified by the *Apocryphal Acts* of the Apostles."<sup>80</sup> Cooper uses the specific example of *Passio Anastasiae* to demonstrate several similarities between the martyr Anastasia and Thecla. Both are imprisoned by their would-be husbands for adopting a firm position on abstinence and both portray a relationship with a male "spiritual mentor" in a seemingly erotic way.<sup>81</sup> It should be noted that Cooper establishes a link between the *Apocryphal Acts* and virgin martyr hagiography no earlier than the fifth-century *Gesta Martyrum*. No connection is made with Agnes at all.

If the story of Thecla had no influence on that of Agnes, why is this well attested virgin martyrdom so often sidelined for a fictional tale of an ascetic woman who never endured martyrdom? There are some scholars who recognize the importance of Agnes to female martyr hagiography. Lucy Grig describes her as an "archetype" of the virgin martyr.<sup>82</sup> Grig nevertheless concedes that other important female martyrs preceded Agnes: "This is not to say that she [Agnes] stood alone: she was preceded by an admittedly small cohort of female martyrs including the highly popular apocryphal heroine Thecla, and the influential North African martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas."<sup>83</sup> Once again, Thecla is erroneously listed as a martyr. The popularity of her cult is not in question, but her role in the development of female martyr hagiography is. If Thecla's

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<sup>80</sup> Cooper, 118.

<sup>81</sup> Cooper 124-25.

<sup>82</sup> Lucy Grig, *Making of Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London: Duckworth and Co., Ltd, 2004): 79.

<sup>83</sup> Grig, 80-81.

cult, popularized outside of Seleucia by the Apocryphal Acts, served as a prototype to later virgin martyr passions like that of Agnes then this means virgin martyr hagiography evolved backwards from how it is traditionally understood to have evolved with the figure of fiction existing before the actual historical account. A closer look at the earliest written accounts on Agnes will demonstrate a link to pagan literature completely independent of the Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla. This connection will help demonstrate the importance not only of Agnes as an archetype for female hagiography. It will also demonstrate the importance of Damasus in developing the cult of the saint for bolstering episcopal authority

#### DAMASUS AND CHRISTIANITY

Damasus and his *elogia* have been the subject of a number of studies on Roman identity in late antiquity. Dennis Trout hails him as the “first Christian archaeologist.”<sup>84</sup> This is because the *elogia* were commemorations attached to important sites associated with Rome’s Christian past. Rome was home to several distinguished martyrs. The most obvious examples are Paul and Peter, who were both considered monumentally important figures in the development of Christianity. Although neither originated from the city, each received his martyr’s crown there. Damasus became pope in 366, only one generation after the death of Constantine. This period saw a huge influx of new converts, many of whom came from the staunchly pagan aristocracy. It would have been important to Roman citizens of this caliber to establish continuity with their Roman past. According to Trout, Damasus offered them an alternative to their pagan ancestry by emphasizing their city’s Christian ancestry:

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<sup>84</sup> Dennis E. Trout, “Damasus and the invention of Early Christian Rome,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* Vol. 33, No. 3 (2003): 527.

If it was not the sole purpose of Damasus' *elogia* to (re)write history in the service of contemporary identity, for his pontificate was troubled by various challenges that threatened to unseat him till the very end, it was surely the effect of this poetry to offer Rome's Christians (and Christianizing Romans) an alternative version of themselves.<sup>85</sup>

Such a project proved daunting when faced with Rome's pagan history. Trout describes a city filled with statues, temples and mausoleums all covered with their own *elogia* dedicated to the *exempla* of Rome's glorious pagan past.<sup>86</sup> Damasus recognized that *mos maiorum* was fundamental to Roman identity regardless of whether one were Christian or pagan.

Even before the reign of Damasus, the Christians of Rome had begun to cultivate their own traditions. The popularity of several martyr cults can be attested by numerous dedications to particular saints and martyrs found on gold-glass portrait vessels produced in the fourth century. Lucy Grig describes the production of this type of portraiture, first developed during the Hellenistic era, as a "substantially late antique phenomenon."<sup>87</sup> Grig demonstrates this point by describing their huge surge in production at Rome in the mid-fourth century: "The overwhelming majority of late antique gold glasses, for which provenance is known, was found in the Roman catacombs, where they were inserted as decoration in the cement seals of *loculus* tombs."<sup>88</sup> Although the earliest examples of gold-glass portray pagan as well as Christian themes, the popular Roman martyr cults eventually overshadowed other forms of gold-glass production.

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<sup>85</sup> Trout, 519.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 519.

<sup>87</sup> Lucy Grig, "Portraits, Pontiffs and the Christianization of Fourth Century Rome," *Papers of the British School at Rome*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (2004): 204

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

Although the inscriptions on these gold-glass portraits offer only a limited view of those responsible for their production, one name appears on the gold-glass portraits of several noteworthy martyrs:

It is DAMAS, however, who appears in four glasses, who constitutes the most intriguing personage represented on a gold-glass. He is identified almost universally with Pope Damasus I (366-384), victor in a bloody battle for the papal throne, adorer of the catacombs and champion of the cult of Roman martyrs.<sup>89</sup>

Grig cautions that Damasus' exact role in the production of gold-glass cannot be ascertained: "The notion of a deliberate ecclesiastical propaganda programme promoting the possibility of *concordia apostolorum* in minor arts, is short on proof, and indeed probability."<sup>90</sup> Grig nevertheless finds it difficult to ignore the possible connection between Damasus' *elogia* and fourth-century gold-glass production: "The case for Damasus' role in the promotion of hagiographic portraiture, while impossible to prove, is highly persuasive."<sup>91</sup>

The juxtaposition of two apostles or other holy figures was commonplace in the artwork of the time. Grig rejects the popular point of view among scholars, originally promoted by Charles Pietri, that the pairing of Peter and Paul, referred to as *concordia apostolorum*, was any more significant than the numerous pairings of other saintly figures:

Images of Peter and Paul together were undoubtedly popular (Table 2), but a language of pairing, both literary and visual, was used widely to represent a far broader range of saints than the princes of the apostles. Damasus, for instance, wrote the epitaphs for eight different martyr pairs and his language heightens the importance of these couplings.

With this statement, Grig demonstrates how close Damasus' connection with the popular martyr cults really was. His *elogia* were so influenced by popular traditions that their

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<sup>89</sup> Grig, "Portraits, Pontiffs," 208-9.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

content and form were inextricably linked to this gold-glass artwork. The problem lies with ascertaining who influenced whom. As Grig has noted, it is impossible to credit the production of gold-glass the ecclesiastical propaganda of Damasus, or any other bishop for that matter. It is perhaps more appropriate to say that these two forms of expression influenced each other. Damasus would not have been featured in the gold-glass artwork had he not been considered an influential patron of the martyr cults. In order to appeal to his audience, Damasus retained the pairings of saints and martyrs already appealing to the public. Appealing to popular tradition was no doubt on Damasus' mind when he produced his *elogia*, but his desire to do so extended beyond the realm of Christian tradition.

In order to associate his own *elogia* with Roman tradition, Damasus picked one of Rome's most enduring classical poets to be the model for all of his literary output. Every single one of his authentic poems is composed in Virgilian meter. The influence was more than just stylistic. Trout links Damasus' *elogium* dedicated to Stephan the proto-martyr with the *Aeneid*. "Damasus' description of a persecuting Roman mob as "mad dogs (*canibus rabidis*)" redeployed words Virgil used to characterize the hounds of Iulus, driven to madness by the fury of Allecto (*Aeneid* 7.493-94)." In fact, Trout considers the use of Virgilian imagery in this poem to be a deliberate attempt on Damasus' part to associate the pagan mob with the "spectre of deranged Dido," thus making the opposition to Christianity look like a "derailing" of Roman destiny.<sup>92</sup>

Maura Lafferty believes Damasus' literary ambitions to extend even deeper. According to Lafferty, the Christian community of pre-Constantinian Rome was still predominately Greek-speaking. Paul's epistle to the Romans along with most of the

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<sup>92</sup> Trout, 521.



second and third-century texts produced in regard to the Roman church were composed in Greek. This was because the earliest Christian community at Rome grew up from the city's Jewish population which was known to speak Greek and not Latin.<sup>93</sup> Yet once the city's nobility began to convert, Greek was no longer acceptable: "If Christians were a 'people of the Book,' so were Romans. Where Christians had their Bible, pagans had their Virgil and Livy."<sup>94</sup> For Lafferty, the *elogium* dedicated to Peter and Paul holds special significance if we consider its pagan audience. In the first five lines of the poem, Damasus deals with the difficulty of claiming these men of eastern origin as *cives* or citizens of the city:

Here you should know lived the first of the Saints  
 You find the names of Peter and Paul together.  
 The East sent the disciples we willingly admit it  
 But, because of the merit of their blood and because they followed Christ through  
 the stars,  
 To seek that ethereal fold and kingdom of the pious.  
 Rome rather has earned the right to defend them as her own citizens.

*Hic habitasse prius sanctos cognoscere debes  
 Nomina quisque Petri partier Paulique requires.  
 Discipulis Oriens misit, quod sponte fatemur  
 Sanguinis ob meritum Christumque per astra secuti,  
 Aetherios petiere sinus et regina piorum.  
 Roma suos potius meruit defendere cives.  
 Haec Damasus vestras referat nova sideris laudes.*<sup>95</sup>

Their eastern origin is a problem which can be overlooked because of their martyrdom at Rome, which is described in the poem in much the same way as a pagan emperor's *apotheosis*.<sup>96</sup> Lafferty fails to note the significance of the poem's ending: "This Damasus relates to your praise, new stars," *Haec Damasus vestras referat nova sidera laudes*. By

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<sup>93</sup> Maura K. Lafferty, "Translating Faith from Greek to Latin: Romanitas and Chistianitas in Late Fourth-Century Rome and Milan," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* Vol. 11, No. 1 (2003): 29.

<sup>94</sup> Lafferty, 37.

<sup>95</sup> Damasus, "Carmen IX," *PLL* 13 (Paris: 1844): 382-3.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

identifying himself in the poem, Damasus credits himself with his above statement. It is he who decides that these new stars are worthy of Rome's past. Damasus includes himself in many of his *elogia* for the express purpose of connecting himself to this newly discovered past.

These poems give evidence to tensions between pagans and Christians in the city. Although the Edict of Milan abolished persecution in 313 C.E., Christianity's place in the empire was far from secure. The Emperor Julian, infamously known to Christians as the Apostate, died only three years before Damasus became bishop of Rome. Under Julian's reign Christians were forbidden to serve as teachers of rhetoric. This measure was taken in an effort to discourage the aristocracy from converting. Even the pagan historian Ammanius Marcellinus considered this tactic a poor decision: "It was a cruel decision moreover needing to be buried in perennial silence, that he forbid masters of rhetoric and grammar to instruct Christians." *Illud autem erat inclemens, obruendum perenni silentio, quod arcebat docere magistros rhetoricos et grammaticos ritus Christiani cultores.*<sup>97</sup> In the edict promulgating this, Julian is said to have scoffed: "If they want to learn literature, they have Luke and Mark."<sup>98</sup> Damasus took steps to insure that the Latin Church would have standardized uniform translation of these works. Giving Roman Christians a rich literary heritage was more than a flight of fancy; it was a necessity.

Damasus' influence over the Latin language extended beyond his own meager corpus of poetry. Lafferty also suggests that Damasus was the bishop responsible for changing the liturgical rite at Rome from Greek to Latin. Only small pieces of the fourth-century Latin liturgy survive, quoted in Ambrose's *De sacramentis*. Lafferty notes that

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<sup>97</sup> J.C. Rolfe, ed., Ammanius Marcellinus, vol. 2 *LCL*, (Harvard University Press, 1950): 22.10.7

<sup>98</sup> Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1971): 93.

these Latin prayers, despite their paratactic syntax adopted from Hebrew grammar, also bear resemblance to Roman pagan prayers:

The priest says, “we both ask and pray” (et petimus et precamur, *De sacramentis* 4.27), where one verb might do. This dibbling of the verb and the use of alliteration is very common in pagan prayer formulae such as do dedicoque (“I give and I devote”).<sup>99</sup>

Lafferty’s observation is interesting but hardly proof of Damasus’ direct involvement. There is nevertheless compelling evidence to suggest that the liturgical Latin cited by Ambrose did in fact come from Roman custom. Lafferty mentions a quotation in *De sacramentis* where Ambrose feels compelled to justify following a custom different from Rome in the matter of the washing of feet during baptism:

We are not unaware that the Roman church, which we make our pattern and model in all things, does not follow this custom.

*Non ignoramus quod Ecclesia Romana hanc consuetudinem non habeat, cuius typum in omnibus sequimur et formam: hanc tamen consuetudinem non habet.*<sup>100</sup>

Ambrose expresses a desire to follow the Roman rite as closely as possible, while still allowing for a certain degree of practical autonomy. If Milan were not in some way indebted to Rome for its liturgical practices, why would Ambrose need to make such a justification for a practice to which he did not adhere?

Lafferty’s assertion fits well with other more well-attested literary reforms credited to Damasus. He also encouraged Saint Jerome, at the time a talented new protégé working in his archives, to complete a revised and standardized translation of the Latin Gospels. A letter dedicating the work to Damasus demonstrates the authoritative position he considered the bishop of Rome to have in matters of Latin scripture. If Jerome finds himself beset by slanderers for his choice of translation, he takes comfort in knowing that

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<sup>99</sup> Lafferty, 48.

<sup>100</sup> Lafferty, 52; Ambrosius, “De sacramentis 3.1.5,” Migne J-P., ed., *PLL 16* (Paris, 1880): 452.

he is backed by the support of Damasus, whom he considers the “highest priest,” *summus sacerdos*:

Against which infamy I am consoled on account of two causes: that it is you, who are the highest priest, who orders it [the translation] to be done, and truth is not to be what might vary, as even now I am vindicated by the witness of slanderers.

*Adversum quam invidiam duplex causa me consolatur: quod et tu qui summus sacerdos es fieri iubes, et verum non esse quod variat etiam maledicorum testimonio conprobatur.*<sup>101</sup>

This alone demonstrates the influence Damasus had on Latin Christianity. Although Jerome completed this monumental translation long after Damasus’ death, it was the bishop of Rome who encouraged him to refine Latin scripture in order to make it acceptable for use in the Roman Liturgy. This same letter describes the problem of using the current translations, which were “almost as numerous as the books themselves,” *tot sunt paene quot codices*.<sup>102</sup>

Damasus’ influence extended beyond liturgical texts and scriptural translation. The famous Virgilian canto of Faltonia Betitia Proba was produced at Rome at roughly the same time as the *elogia*.<sup>103</sup> One compelling argument for the production of this Christian canto, composed of repurposed lines of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, was a need to respond to the Julian’s law forbidding Christians from studying classical rhetoric and grammar. Elizabeth Clark has suggested that poem served as pedagogical text to replace Virgil.<sup>104</sup> R. P. Green considers the evidence for this scanty at best and suggests that the work was instead intended as a Christian polemic against the emperor Julian’s law:

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<sup>101</sup> Hieronymus, Roger, Gryson, et al., ed., *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgata versionem, fierte Auflage* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994): 1515

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Elizabeth Clark, “Faltonia Betitia Proba and her Virgilian Poem: The Christian Matron as an Artist,” in *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith, Studies in Women and Religion 20* (Edwin Mellon Press, 1986): 124-152.

<sup>104</sup> E.A. Clark and D.F. Hatch, *The Golden Bough, the Oaken Cross: The Virgilian cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba* (American Academy of Religion: Texts and Translations 5, 1981): 7-8.

A more considerable objection is that there is little or nothing in the preface to suggest that the work was designed to be a school textbook. The combativeness of the first half would hardly have commended it to the authorities, and can hardly belong to the same phase.<sup>105</sup>

Regardless of the canto's intended purpose, it was closely tied to the Virgilian *elogia* of Damasus. Parts of the cento appear either to reference or be referenced by Damasus, though evidence in this matter is far too sparse to make any definitive claims.<sup>106</sup> Proba's canto is composed entirely of lines composed by Virgil; therefore, any attempt to compare the grammar or verbiage of Damasus and Proba is problematic. It is nevertheless worth noting that other Christian writers were compelled by the events of the 360s to use Rome's classical, literary past to encourage conversion to Christianity.

The *Carmen Contra Paganos* or "Poem against the Pagans" is another, even more poignant example from this period of Virgilian verse being used for Christian invective. The *CCP* is an anonymous invective of 122 lines written to slander a pagan prefect. Although the subject of the poem is still hotly debated by classicists, Alan Cameron finds a reasonable amount of evidence to support the claim that Praetextatus was the poem's intended subject. Praetextatus was prefect of the city in 384 up until the time of his death. The memory of his distinguished rise through the *cursus honorum* was preserved in an epitaph attributed to his wife. Included in his list of accomplishments is the office of pontifex of Vesta. As a city prefect and a devout follower of traditional Roman religion, Praetextatus was a natural outlet for Christian invective. What is most interesting is the close resemblance that the *CCP* has to the poetic style of Damasus. Cameron even considers Damasus to be a possible candidate for author based on stylistic similarities

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<sup>105</sup> R.P.H. Green, "Proba's Canto: Its Date, Purpose and Reception," *The Classical Quarterly, New Series*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (1995):560.

<sup>106</sup> Green, 562.

between this poem and his *elogia*: “Both Damasus and the author of the *CCP* are steeped in Virgil, and positively stuff their lines with Virgilian tags. But neither could really be described as a learned poet.”<sup>107</sup> Similarities in the grammatical deficiencies of each poet point to a common origin. Cameron notes that the author of *CCP* is the only other poet in Latin literature to completely avoid the use of the conjunction *et*: “Both are relatively short texts but even so it cannot have been easy to avoid using the commonest single word in the Latin language.”<sup>108</sup> This attribution is problematic however because Damasus died in December of 384, just weeks after the death of Praetextatus, who is already dead in the poem itself. This problem suggests that the *CCP* was produced by an imitator sufficiently influenced by Damasus’ style to imitate his peculiar use of grammar.

Damasus has often been criticized for the poor quality of his literary output. Abbè Duchesne is particularly harsh in his criticism of the *elogia*, claiming that the only beauty which can be found in them is from the hands of the mason who carved them: “Never have worse verses been transcribed so exquisitely. And if the verses were only bad! But they are empty of history, they are obscure and contain scarcely anything but commonplaces.”<sup>109</sup> Damasus was far from a stylistic genius, but the above evidence seems to suggest that his work was appreciated and even imitated in its own time. The *elogia* are not empty of history. They are a testament to one bishop’s unique understanding of Roman history and its importance to the newest members of the Roman church. Yet the *elogia* did more than establish a venerable Christian past for newly-converted Romans. Christianity itself was never more divisive and schismatic in the city

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<sup>107</sup> Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford University Press, 2011): 313.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>109</sup> Abbe Duchesne, *The Early History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2 (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1922): 383.

of Rome than when Damasus became pope in 366 C.E. It is now necessary to take a closer look at the Christian community itself at Rome in order to add another dimension to Damasus' sacred "archaeological" program.

#### DAMASUS AND THE ROMANIZATION OF ORTHODOXY

The emperor Constantine called the council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. in an effort to unify and strengthen a church already deeply fractured into doctrinal factions. This council was an important first attempt to identify a universal or "catholic" understanding of Christianity. Whereas Constantine desired strength through unity, his son Constantius II sought to divide and conquer. In *The World of Late Antiquity*, Peter Brown notes the role played by the Christian bishop in relation to the imperial court: "The bishops joined the bureaucrats as members of the new governing class that was centered on the emperor's court."<sup>110</sup> Yet this bureaucratic bishop had to contend with the realities of fourth-century politics. A bishop now used doctrinal dissension and moral superiority as tools to overthrow or supplant his political rivals: "The bishops learnt that, if they were courtiers, they must be prepared to rise and fall like courtiers."<sup>111</sup> In an effort to disrupt the powerbase of more authoritarian bishops like Athanasius, Constantius quickly adopted Arianism, a doctrine in direct opposition to the decisions laid out by his father's famous council.<sup>112</sup> The "great" emperor's elder son Constantius laid the groundwork for strife between Christian factions in the late fourth century, just as his successor Julian would lay the groundwork for rivalry between Christian and pagan factions in the same era.

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<sup>110</sup> Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1971): 89.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

The chief source on the early papacy is the sixth-century *Liber Pontificalis*.<sup>113</sup> This is an unsatisfactory source in a number of ways. As a document produced centuries after the events it describes, it naturally tends to favor the victor in doctrinal disputes. In addition to this problem, it is riddled with anachronisms, often crediting the works of patronage to the bishops of a later date. Fortunately, it is not the only historical document to record the papacy of Damasus. The *Collectio Avellana*, a collection of episcopal letters surviving from the late fourth and fifth centuries, gives a voice to the faction at Rome opposed to Damasus.<sup>114</sup> The *Collectio* begins with a description of Pope Liberius' troubled papacy, threatened by pressures from Constantius' Arian administration. It appears that Constantius required every bishop to condemn Athanasius, the leader of the Nicæan opposition:

But Liberius, bishop of Rome, Eusebius of Vercelli, Lucifer of Cagliari and Hilary of Poitiers were unwilling to pronounce a guilty verdict. Therefore these four were sent into exile for disobedience.

*Sed Liberius Romanus episcopus et eusebius Vercellensis et Lucifer Caralitanus et Hilarius Picuensis dare sententiam noluerunt. Hi ergo mittuntur in exilium pro fide seruanda.*<sup>115</sup>

Liberius was one of only four to object to the emperor's designs by refusing to condemn Athanasius. His exile left a vacuum, allowing for the election of a new bishop—one more open-minded to Arianism.

According to the *Collectio*, Damasus and his fellow clergymen initially swore an oath that they would accept no bishop other than Liberius. Eventually, they themselves

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<sup>113</sup> Andreas Agnellus, *Liber Pontificalis*, PLL, 106.

<sup>114</sup> Ekhard Wirbelauer, ed. , "Collectio Avellana," 1.1., *Zwei Papste in Rom : der Konflikt zwischen Laurentius und Symmachus (498-514): Studien und Texte* (Tuduv: Munchen, 2007).

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.1.



caved in to political pressure and elected Felix, a deacon under Liberius as the new bishop of Rome:

The deacon Damasus and all of the church officials swore together in the presence of the Roman people that they were not about to have another bishop while Liberius was alive.

*Damasus diaconus et cuncta ecclesiae officia omnes pariter praesente populo Romano sub iureiurando firmarunt se uiuente Liberio pontificem alterum nullatenus habituros.*<sup>116</sup>

This oath is a testament to the popularity of Liberius because once it was broken the ordinary Christians of Rome refused to support this new anti-pope: “What was done displeased the entire population, and they avoided his inaugural procession,” *quod factum uniuerso populo displicuit et se ab eius processione susceperunt.*<sup>117</sup> The *Collectio* emphasizes the role Damasus plays in these events more than anyone else, establishing him as the antagonist in the events that follow.

It seems that Liberius spent three years in exile before he agreed to some of Constantius’ demands. Once Liberius returned to Rome, he had to contend with the new bishop Felix, who—unpopular though he was—now stood as a supporter of orthodoxy over Arianism. The doctrinal position of Felix meant little to the people of Rome who quickly forced him out of the city.<sup>118</sup> After eight years of attempting to restore himself as bishop, Felix died. In an effort to find peace with his supporters Liberius forgave him and his followers: “Liberius had mercy on the clergy who had broken their oaths and received them into their former positions,” *Liberius misericordiam fecit in clericos qui periurauerant, eosque locis propriis suscepit.*<sup>119</sup> This presumably included Damasus,

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<sup>116</sup> “Collectio Avellana,” 1.2.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.2.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.3.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.4.

who is now not mentioned by name. Liberius himself died in the same year, leaving a divided clergy to decide who would be the next bishop of Rome. According to the *Collectio*, a group of clerics who had not perjured themselves during Liberius' exile elected their own candidate, Ursinus. The rest of the clergy supported Damasus as a successor to Liberius. In an effort to eliminate the opposition, Damasus is said to have taken a number of reprehensible actions:

After seven days, he took the Lateran basilica with all the perjurers and performers whom he had corrupted with lots of money, and was ordained bishop there. And by paying off the city judge Viventius and the Praefectus Annonae Julius, He arranged it so that Ursinus, the venerable man who had already been elected bishop, was sent into exile along with the deacons Amantius and Lupus.

*Post dies septem cum omnibus periuris et arenariis, quos ingenti corrupit pretio, Lateranensem basilicam tenuit et ibi ordinatus episcopus et redimens iudicem Urbis Viventium et praefectum annonae Iulianum id egit, ut Ursinus uir uenerabilis, qui prius fuerat pontifex ordinatus, cum Amantio et Lupo diaconibus in exsilium mitterentur.*<sup>120</sup>

This portrayal of Damasus is far more negative than that of the *Liber Pontificalis*, which simply states that a neutral council of priests made the decision: "It thus confirmed Damasus because he was the stronger candidate with more popular support," *Damasum, quia fortior et plurima multitudo erat, et sic constitutus est Damasus.*<sup>121</sup>

The election at a centrally important site like the Lateran was an important step in the right direction, but Damasus had to stain his reputation even further before his struggle with Ursinus came to an official end. After the exile of Ursinus, his supporters continued to cause trouble for Damasus. The *Collectio* states that they convened and held services at a church to Saint Agnes outside the city walls on the modern Via

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<sup>120</sup> "Collectio Avellana," 1.6.

<sup>121</sup> "Liber Pontificalis," 39.1.

Nomentana.<sup>122</sup> Damasus took this an affront to his authority as bishop and responded forcefully at one such religious gathering: “Whence when many of the faithful had gathered at Saint Agnes’ church, Damasus, armed, rushed in with his followers and killed many in his devastating massacre,” *Unde cum ad sanctam Agnem multi fidelium conuenissent, armatus cum satellitibus suis Damasus irruit et plurimos uastationis suae strage deiecit.*<sup>123</sup> The location of this massacre is particularly significant.

The Church of Saint Agnes on the Via Nomentana had been constructed by the emperor Constantine’s daughter, Constantia. Liberius himself had used the church when he returned to the city in order to emphasize his newfound unity with the imperial family. The *Liber Pontificalis* suggests that a close association with Constantius’ sister was also a close association with orthodoxy because she never took up the Arian heresy of her brother:

When Liberius returned from exile, he inhabited the cemetery of Saint Agnes in the presence of the emperor Constantius’ sister, so that by her intervention or request he might gain admittance to the city. Then Constantia Augusta, who was faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ did not want to ask her brother because she knew his answer.

*Rediens autem Liberius de exilio, habitauit in cymiterio sanctae Agnae apud germanam Constanti Augusti, ut quasi per eius interuentionem aut rogatu rediret Liberius in ciuitatem. Tunc Constantia Augusta, quae fidelis erat domino Iesu Christo, noluit rogare Constantium Augustum germanum suum, quia senserat consilium.*<sup>124</sup>

Liberius had to capitulate to an Arian emperor in order to ensure his return from exile. It was a wise political decision on his part to cover this fact up by patronizing a site associated with the “orthodox” part of the imperial family. The significance of this site

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<sup>122</sup> “Collectio Avellana,” 1.12; The Collectio identifies this church with Constantia. For a detailed examination of the archaeological evidence connecting the modern church of Sant’Agnese Via Nomentana with Constantia’s private chapel, see Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*.

<sup>123</sup> “Collectio Avellana,” 1.12.

<sup>124</sup> “Liber Pontificalis,” 37.4.

was not lost on the supporters of Ursinus or Damasus himself. These two factions were in a battle to prove legitimacy by establishing their ties with the previous bishop as well as the unbroken line of orthodoxy which the site represented.

These struggles in the first few years of Damasus' reign establish context for his building programs as well as the *elogia* intended to adorn his churches. Marianne Saghy notes that Damasus focused his attention on martyrs who had once been bishops in times of strife: "The heroes of the Damasian epigrams are clergymen: apostles, popes, deacons. The most important figure among them is the 'peacemaker bishop', such as Marcellus, Eusebius, Hippolytus."<sup>125</sup> This notion of the "peacemaker bishop" derives from Peter Brown's *The Cult of the Saints*: "This accords well with Peter Brown's view of the cult of the saints as pacifier possessed of the power to recreate consensus and concordia among warring Christian factions."<sup>126</sup> Damasus focused his attention on martyrs whom he could easily associate himself with. Saghy demonstrates how two associations with former bishops of Rome served to bolster Damasus' own authority.

Marcellus served as pope until his martyrdom in 309 C.E., during the persecution of Maxentius. His *elogium* is located on the church of Saint Sylvester, which was later built over the cemetery said to house the saint. Saghy renders the Marcellus *elogium* as follows:

A venerable pastor, for he bade the apostates mourn their guilt  
And was a bitter enemy to all wretches.  
Thence arose anger, hatred discord, strife,  
Mutiny, bloodshed; the bonds of peace were loosed (*soluuntur foedera pacis*).  
Accused by one who in peace denied Christ,  
He was driven by the cruel tyrant from his own country.  
This in brief Damasus ascertained and recorded,

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<sup>125</sup> Marianne Saghy, "Scinditur in partes populous: Pope Damasus and the Martyrs of Rome," 278

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

That the people might know the virtue of Marcellus.<sup>127</sup>

*Veridicus rector, lapsos quia crimine flere  
Praedixit miseris, fuit omnibus hostis amarus.  
Hinc furor, hinc odium sequitur, Discordia, lites,  
Seditio, caedes, solvuntur foedera pacis:  
Crime ob alterius Christum qui in pace negavit,  
Finibus expulsus patriae est feritate tyranni.  
Haec breviter Damasus voluit comperta referre,  
Marcelli ut populous meritum cognoscere posset.*<sup>128</sup>

Saghy draws attention to the loosened bonds of peace, which Damasus portrays as the chief reason for Marcellus' martyrdom in the poem. Saghy considers this poem to directly mirror Damasus' papacy. In essence, Damasus portrays Marcellus as a peacemaker because that is how he would like himself to be viewed: "Peace was what was most needed in the divided Christian community after 366. Instead of peace, however, the Damasian church offered only the occasional ceasefire."<sup>129</sup> There are some obvious parallels between this poem and the events of the 360s mentioned above; however, it is likely that this poem was intended to be linked with another *elogium* dedicated to Marcellus' successor Eusebius.

Damasus composed a second *elogium* dedicated to Pope Eusebius, the successor to Marcellus in 309. In this poem Damasus reiterates many of the themes found in the one above. Saghy renders this *elogium* as follows:

Heraclius forbade the apostates to grieve for their sins.  
Eusebius taught the wretched to mourn their guilt.  
The people were rent in factions and anger mounted,  
Mutiny, bloodshed, war, discord, strife.  
Both were driven alike from the temple by the cruel tyrant,  
Though the pastor was keeping unbroken the bonds of peace.  
Gladly he suffered exile under the Lord's judgment;

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<sup>127</sup> Saghy, 282; Because her argument is dependant on her word choice, Saghy's own translation is used here for the Hymns to Marcellus and Heraclius.

<sup>128</sup> Damasus, "Carmen XI," *PLL* 13, 384-5.

<sup>129</sup> Saghy, 282.

On the Sicilian shore he departed from earth and life.  
To Eusebius, bishop and martyr.<sup>130</sup>

*Heraclius vetuit lapsos peccata dolere,  
Eusebius miseris docuit sua criminal flere.  
Scinditur in partes vulgus gliscente furore.  
Seditio, caedes, bellum, Discordia, lites:  
Exemplo pariter pulsi feritate tyranni  
Integra cum Rector servaret foedera pacis  
Pertulit exsilium omnino sub iudice laetus  
Littore Trinacrio mundum vitamque reliquit.*<sup>131</sup>

At this point, Saghy points out the rather obvious comparisons between the events recorded in the *Collectio Avellana* and these two poems: “These Damasian epigrams can also be read as a list of recent events within the Roman congregation.”<sup>132</sup> Yet Saghy provides no more detail than this. A closer analysis of these two poems together may help reveal the message which Damasus wishes to convey.

In the first poem to Marcellus, the peace is broken by “one who denied Christ during a time of peace,” *ob alterius Christum qui in pace negavit*. This figure is supported by “those who have lapsed,” *lapsos*. This terminology undoubtedly refers to Christians who renounced Christianity and turned in others to escape execution; however, Damasus makes it look like a factional struggle which leads to “anger, hatred discord, strife, mutiny, bloodshed” *furor, odium, discordia, lites, seditio, caedes*... The world has been thrown into chaos by these lapsed Christians. Marcellus is not martyred in the poem itself but instead punished by “exile,” just like Liberius. The “cruelty of the tyrant,” *feritate tyranni* even reminds the reader of Constantius who tyrannically imposes his will over episcopal matters. But it is the final lines of the poem that have the most significance: “Having collected this, Damasus wished to relate it so that the people would be able to

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<sup>130</sup> Saghy, 282; see footnote 122.

<sup>131</sup> Damasus, “Carmen XI,” *PLL* 13, 384-5.

<sup>132</sup> Saghy, 282.

know the merit of Marcellus.” The poem serves as a warning and testament to the chaos created by the lapsed Christians. Damasus appears to be drawing a comparison here between the Christians who turned on Marcellus and the supporters of Felix against Liberius. He wants his readers to know what factionalism has done to the church in the past.

The poem dedicated to Eusebius shares a number of similarities with the first poem. Eusebius is also venerable because he “taught the wretched to mourn their guilt.” This appears to be a compassionate appeal on Eusebius’ part to allow his opponents to think on their sins. The figure of Heraclius in line one serves as a contrast to this characterization of Eusebius. He forbade the “lapsed to grieve their sins.” It may be a bit of a stretch on Saghy’s part to translate *lapsos* as “apostate.” Although the *lapsos* undeniably conjure notions of heresy, the poem is nevertheless directly describing events during persecution of Maxentius. The Christians actually referred to in the poem would be those who lapsed in their faith during the persecution. By defining *lapsos* in this way, the difference between Heraclius and Eusebius becomes clear. Heraclius is unwilling to forgive those lapsed Christians while Eusebius is willing to accept them back peacefully if they recognize their own guilt. Eusebius is thus a figure willing to mend the divide caused by this factionalism. It is likely that Damasus wants to associate himself with Eusebius as a figure of forgiveness. In the first poem, he draws a comparison to Liberius’ papacy and the price of factionalism. In the second poem, he draws a comparison to his own tumultuous papacy and the desire to mend the divide caused by his election. Damasus thus adapts the stories of these peacemaking bishops of Rome’s past to suit his own purposes.

Damasus draws attention to himself at the end of most of these *elogia*. His purpose for doing so seems to vary from poem to poem, but a common understanding of his authorship lends authority to his project. John Curran analyzes several of these self-serving lines in an effort to find a common goal behind the production of the *elogia*: “Through his unprecedentedly extensive patronage of the Christian holy sites, Damasus promoted his own claim to the position of intermediary between *plebs Dei* and the saints and martyrs.”<sup>133</sup> On the tomb of Saints Protus and Hyacinthus, Damasus writes: “The tomb was hidden under the hill’s furthest mound: this Damasus reveals, because he preserves the bodies of the pious,” *Extremo tumulus latuit sub aggere montis / Hunc Damasus monstrat servat quod membra piorum*.<sup>134</sup> At the cemetery of Domitilla on the Via Ardentina, Damasus dedicated an inscription to the martyr soldiers: Achilleus and Nereus. Curran translates the final line of it in the following way: “Believe through Damasus what the glory of Christ is capable of,” *Credite per Damasum possit quid Gloria Christi*.<sup>135</sup> In this particular case, it may be more appropriate to translate the adjective *per* as, “by means of,” rather than “through.” *Per* can be used to express agency, and it seems clear that Damasus wishes to identify himself as the necessary agent to convey, “what the glory of Christ is capable of.” This self-imposed agency demonstrates that Damasus used the cults of important local saints to bolster his own authority in relation to the Christian community. It was “by means of” his own poetic accounts of martyrdom that average Christians could relate their own lives to the saint or martyr.

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<sup>133</sup> John Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital: Rome in the Fourth Century* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 2000): 150.

<sup>134</sup> Curran, 149; Damasus, “Carmen XXVI,” *PLL* 13.

<sup>135</sup> Curran, 150; Damasus, “Carmen XXV,” *PLL* 13.



Damasus used the *elogia* to impose a different kind of control over the Christian community at Rome. The *elogia* were intended to adorn shrines, cemeteries and churches as part of a building and restoration program. Curran believes that the sites he chose to focus on and the sites he chose to ignore also hold significance: “Along with Constantine, his is the most significant contribution to the topography of the city in the fourth century.”<sup>136</sup> Damasus was the first pope to extensively fund building projects of this nature in Rome. This accords well with the common understanding of how political patronage worked in Rome. A political figure would construct a public building as a way of winning favor with his *clientes*, who would in turn offer their support in his rise through the *cursus honorum*. The Christian *plebs* of the city therefore acted favorably towards their patron emperor Constantine for legalizing their religion and building them churches in which to congregate. Damasus’ building program was comprehensive enough to subsume this traditionally imperial role. With the emperor now located in the east, the bishop could rise as the undisputed *patronus* of Rome.

Curran demonstrates that much of Damasus’ building occurred in areas of the city where his support was weakest, among the *suburbia* which surrounded the city itself.<sup>137</sup> The martyrs he chose to ignore are just as important as those he chose to focus on. Saghy points out that the schismatic Novatian’s tomb on the Via Tiburtina was ignored while the third-century anti-pope Hippolytus, located only a short distance away, was praised in an elogium:

Presbyter Hippolytus is said to have remained  
In the schism of Novatus while the laws of the tyrant prevailed  
But when the sword cut the marrow of the pious mother  
Devoted to Christ, he was looking for the kingdom of the faithful.

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<sup>136</sup> Curran, 142.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 146.

When asked by the people which way to choose  
He answered that the Catholic faith should be followed by all  
Thus he deserved to be venerated as our own martyr.  
Damasus tells this story as he heard it, with the approval of Christ.<sup>138</sup>

*Hippolytus fertur premerent cum iussa tyranni  
Presbyter in scisma semper mansisse Novati  
Tempore quo gladius secuit pia viscera matris,  
Devotus Christo peteret cum regna piorum,  
Quaesisset populus ubinam procedere posset,  
Catholicam dixisse fidem sequerentur ut omnes  
Sic noster meruit confessus martyr ut esset  
Haec audita refert Damasus probat omnia XPS.*<sup>139</sup>

Saghy suggests that this poem was intended to emphasize the bishop's capacity of forgiveness in reference to former schismatics: "This epigram suggests that the Church forgives lost sheep and includes former heretics among its saints on the condition that they acknowledge their errors and return to the "Catholic" flock."<sup>140</sup> This may be true, but this *elogium* also demonstrates that Damasus had a clear understanding of who was schismatic and who was orthodox. Only a martyr who has repented and returned to the Nicene doctrine, "deserves to be venerated." As author, Damasus takes it upon himself to judge who is heretic and who is orthodox. In fact, this role became increasingly suitable to him in the later years of his papacy.

Damasus appears to have given a great deal of thought to the issue of orthodoxy throughout his tenure as bishop. This is not surprising because during Liberius' tenure as bishop, Rome seems to have fractured into competing groups of interest, each claiming to be the most orthodox in order to justify its own existence. The *elogia* helped him establish proper channels of devotion to orthodox martyrs, and Damasus strengthened his own orthodoxy by associating himself with them. His success in doing so is evident in his

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<sup>138</sup> Saghy, 284.

<sup>139</sup> Ursula Reutter, *Damasus Bischof von Rom, 366-384* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009): 90.

<sup>140</sup> Saghy, 284.

involvement in an important ecumenical council to weed out the last remnants of the Apollinarian heresy in 382. The Council of Rome in 382 was instigated primarily by Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, after the shortcomings of the Council of Aquileia a year earlier.<sup>141</sup> Ambrose had used his close relationship with the western emperor Gratian in order to authorize the Council of Aquileia, but poor eastern attendance and a negative response from the eastern emperor Theodosius made this council ineffectual. Not to be outdone, Ambrose called for a second council to be held at Rome to deal with Apollinarism—a heretical position that was not quite as radical as Arianism, but which still held implications for other heretical ideas associated with the substance of Christ.<sup>142</sup>

This Council of Rome in 382 received greater western support due to the influence of the bishop of Rome, but still only enjoyed nominal support from the east. A delegation of three eastern bishops arrived with little interest in recognizing the council's authority: "Even the amiable Theodoret detected sarcasm in the message conveyed by their token delegation of three bishops (escorted by court officials), which thanked the westerners for this belated interest in eastern affairs and regretted their inability to attend."<sup>143</sup> Neil McLynn considers both of these councils to be an attempt on Ambrose's part to secure authority in relation to his fellow western bishops. If this is true, then they met with only limited success. McLynn points out that even at Aquileia, Ambrose was seen as the mere puppet of the senior bishop of Rome: "His role as Rome's spokesman had not yet been fully refined at Aquileia, where he earned Palladius' derision for

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<sup>141</sup> Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994): 140-46.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

‘playing the servant’ by reading out three letters from Damasus.”<sup>144</sup> Although the Council of Rome in 382 failed to make any definitive ruling on the Apollinarian heresy and saw virtually no support from the east, it nevertheless allowed Damasus the opportunity to verbalize his own authority as the chief western patriarch to a council of thirty-two western bishops.

An excerpt from this council survives in one of the epistles of Damasus to Jerome. The statement made in this letter bears close resemblance to the *elogium* to Peter and Paul above. In the *elogium*, Peter’s martyrdom makes him Roman first and foremost. In the following epistle, Peter’s martyrdom at Rome overrides his previous apostolic career making his place in Rome more important than anywhere else. Once again, Damasus uses his close association with the martyr Peter to proclaim Rome’s authoritative place in the church’s administrative hierarchy:

The first is the Roman seat of the apostle Peter, having neither blemish nor wrinkle nor anything else of this manner. The second seat of blessed Peter is Alexandria consecrated by the name of his disciple and evangelist Mark, directed by the apostle Peter in Egypt, he spoke forth the word of truth and then completed his glory in martyrdom. The third seat of the most blessed apostle Peter is in Antioch, which holds this honor because it was the first place he dwelled before he had come to Rome, and where he first brought the news of the Christian people.

*Est ergo prima Petri apostoli sedes Romana Ecclesia, non habens maculam, neque rugam, neque aliud huiusmodi. Secunda autem sedes apud Alexandriam, beati Petri nomine a Marco eius discipulo atque evangelista consecrate est: ipseque in Aegyptum directus a Petro apostolo, verbum veritatis praedicavit, et gloriosum consummavit martyrium. Tertia autem sedes est apud Antiochiam beatissimi sui apostolic Petri, quae habetur honorabilis, eo quod primitis, quam Romam venisset, habitaverit, et illic primum nomen Christianorum novellae gentis.*<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> McLynn, 280.

<sup>145</sup> Damasus, “Epistle IX,” *PLL* 13, 374-76.

This statement is an early iteration of papal supremacy, later made famous by Pope Gelasius in the sixth century. It argues that Rome's authority supersedes that of Antioch or Alexandria because Peter earned his martyr's crown at Rome. The statement had almost no meaning at all in the East because neither of these bishops had bothered to attend the council, but it nevertheless demonstrates that Damasus was beginning to promote papal supremacy among western circles and that he did so primarily through his association with Peter the martyr as opposed to Peter the apostle.

#### AGNES AND THE ROMANIZATION OF THE MARTYR CULT

The Roman martyr Agnes died during the great persecution of Diocletian sometime between 295 and 305 B.C.E. She was a young woman of noble birth who refused to marry and lose her virginity. The specifics of her death are significant because they help explain the immense growth in popularity of her cult in only the span of one generation. Agnes died during the last great persecution of Christians at the old capital of the empire. This made her a unique figure who stood at the threshold of a new Christian epoch. Her local appeal at Rome made her an excellent martyr for both the imperial family and the bishops of Rome to patronize. By tying themselves closely to this particular martyr, the bishops of Rome enjoyed the support of the local populace. The first church dedicated to Saint Agnes was constructed during the Constantian era of basilica construction. This was the period that defined Christian architecture. After apprehending the colossal Basilica of Maxentius, Constantine used this public building (which had been built by his chief rival) as a model for the Christian church, thus insuring a public and very Roman context for the once notoriously clandestine agape feasts of the Christians. This architecture was a key first step in the Romanization of

Christianity.<sup>146</sup> The Church of Saint Agnes was more than just another Constantinian project. Constantia, the daughter of Constantine, constructed the basilica as her personal chapel and mausoleum. She did this in order to associate her own worldly nobility with the spiritual nobility of the martyr. In death, Constantia enjoyed veneration by the adherents of the Agnes cult, thus forever blurring the line between holy patron and worldly client.

The significance of Constantia's endeavor was not lost on Pope Liberius. The desire to associate himself with the pro-Nicene Constantia after his supplication before her brother was only one reason for patronizing Constantia's church. The *Liber Pontificalis* mentions that Liberius continued to watch over the site closely after her death. He even began his own renovation of the church years before Damasus came to power: "Liberius decorated the tomb of the martyr Agnes with marble tablets, so that all of Felix's years are included in his reckoning," *Hic Liberius ornauit de platomis marmoreis sepulchrum sanctae Agnae martyris. Omnes itaque anni Felicis in huius ordine dinumerantur.*<sup>147</sup> This passage suggests that the renovation was an attempt on Liberius' part to gain popularity at the expense of his rival Felix, who was still a recognized bishop of Rome at the time.

After Constantine, Damasus was responsible for the next major wave of church architecture in Rome. Krautheimer links Damasus' building and renovation with his fervor for Romanizing the church: "Indeed, since the Pontificate of Damasus, the church in Rome had striven to play down its foreign eastern roots and to present herself as

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<sup>146</sup> Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, 4-31.

<sup>147</sup> "Liber Pontificalis," *PLL* 108, 37.7.

Roman in origin and spirit.”<sup>148</sup> Damasus was responsible for a major renovation of the Constantinian Saint Peter’s Basilica and many other Constantinian sites. Krautheimer also credits him with beginning the construction of San Paolo fuori la mura, the church of Saint Paul located outside the city walls.<sup>149</sup> This is significant because the new church to Saint Paul was designed to complement Saint Peter’s Basilica, just as Damasus’ *elogium* to the two martyred apostles placed them on equal footing. It is not surprising to see an *elogium* linked so closely to his building program. The *elogia*, after all, were composed as inscriptions to adorn holy sites. Understanding the building program can help unlock key details about an *elogium*’s context.

In a detailed survey of Rome’s Christian topography, David Curran points out several interesting characteristics of Damasus’ building program. According to Curran, one of Damasus’ more noteworthy endeavors was the construction of a basilica dedicated to Saint Anastasia. This building was significant due to its location more than its architecture: “S. Anastasia was therefore the first Christian church to be situated in the monumental sacred Palatine-Forum area... the siting of the church was undoubtedly a symbolic statement. Christianity had entered the pagan heart of Rome with its new specially designed temple.”<sup>150</sup> This conforms to the notion that Damasus wanted to link Rome’s Christianity with the city’s glorious past. The topography of Damasus’ building program is significant for another reason. It seems that most of Damasus’ efforts were focused on building church’s outside of the city walls, where Damasus’ opposition was greatest:

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<sup>148</sup> Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, 41.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>150</sup> Curran, 143-44.

The extent of Damasus' work was remarkable. In his eighteen-year pontificate he was able to investigate a ring of holy sites around the city on a scale which was quite without precedent. The endeavors of the pope helped physically unite the sites beyond the walls into an almost unitary Christian hinterland of Rome.<sup>151</sup>

Damasus' *elogia* were part of a much greater project designed to heal the factional strife within Christianity while winning over additional support from Rome's aristocracy. Yet the question of what inspired Damasus to undertake such an extensive campaign still remains. This question is best answered by reconsidering Damasus' history with Constantia's chapel.

Damasus' renovation of the site must have begun under similar circumstances to that of Liberius. Damasus was also in a relatively weak position at the beginning of his papacy. The *Collectio Avellana* attests that a major confrontation broke out here between the supporters of Damasus and those of his rival Ursinus. Both factions struggled to prove their own orthodoxy, and this site seems to have been a strong symbol for that orthodoxy, perhaps due to the association with Constantia. Damasus' *elogium* to the martyr herself will help demonstrate the importance that this particular martyr held for the survival of his early papacy:

Rumor tells that her holy parents related how  
Agnes, at the mournful song of the horn, leapt up from  
The lap of her nurse having suddenly ceased to be a girl  
She willingly *spurned* the rage and threats of a savage tyrant:  
She willed her noble body to burn in flames,  
With her small strength she overcame immense fear,  
And gave her profuse hair to cover her nude limbs  
So that no mortal face might see the temple of the lord.  
Oh my venerable nourisher, oh holy glory of chastity  
I beg that you might nourish the prayers of Damasus, oh famous virgin.

*Fama refert Sanctos dudum retulisse parentes  
Agnem cum lugubres cantus tuba concrepuisset, A  
Nutricis gremium subito liquisse puellam;*

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<sup>151</sup> Curran, 146.



*Sponte trucis calcasse minas, rabiemque tyranni:  
Urere cum flammis voluisset nobile corpus,  
Viribus immensum parvis superasse timorem,  
Nudaque perfusos crines, et membra dedisse,  
Ne domini templum facies peritura videret.  
O veneranda mihi, sanctum decus alma pudoris,  
Ut Damasi precibus faveas precor inclyta Virgo.<sup>152</sup>*

Notice that the role Damasus plays in this *elogium* is different from his portrayal in previous poems. In his *elogia* to the bishops Marcellus and Eusebius, Damasus speaks with the confidence of a bishop who has earned the right to decide what orthodox is. He speaks with a degree of authority and uses the poems as proof of his continuity with Rome's past bishops. Yet he cannot do so in this poem to Agnes. This was the site of a bloody massacre for which he was responsible. The Christians of Rome could not ignore that fact. He concludes his poem with a supplication to the martyr to heed his prayers—prayer that no doubt centered on the events which happened at the church itself. Although no concrete date can be given for any one *elogium*, it is reasonable to assume that this particular renovation began right after he took the church over from the Ursinians in 367. The date is significant in this case because it establishes Damasus' meager account of the martyr as the first written record of her death. Ambrose's *De virginibus* would not be written for another decade, and there is evidence to suggest that Damasus' inscription influenced his longer account. What is more important to stress here is that this *elogium* was likely one of the first he produced. Unlike his other *elogia*, where he could choose to focus on the accounts of bishops and heroes of his liking, he had to write about Agnes due to her overwhelming popularity. He has no control over the details of her martyrdom—a fact he freely admits—and instead he relies on her *fama* or reputation. It

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<sup>152</sup> Damasus, "Carmen XXIX," *PLL* 13, 1-10.

has been demonstrated that this *fama* is well attested in the archaeological record due to the vast number of gold-glass artistic renderings found dating from the fourth century.

Damasus needs Agnes more than any other martyr, in order to establish his own authority over the Roman church because she is the quintessential Roman martyr even at this point. This is an important fact which must be kept in mind while exploring Agnes' impact on hagiography. A source as distant as Thecla or Perpetua would never have helped Damasus secure his position. He needed Agnes to justify his existence more than she needed him to justify hers. Agnes is perhaps more responsible than he for Romanizing female martyrdom. Constantia knew this when she constructed her basilica from the *spolia* of the ancient city just as Damasus knew it when he immortalized her in Virgilian meter. Both of these figures used her cult to ally themselves more closely to the Roman church and what that church considered orthodox. The *elogium* tells us less about the martyr's life than it does about Damasus' papacy. Yet as popular as she was, her story was subject to embellishment at the hands of authors with even grander ambitions.

### CHAPTER 3: *DE VIRGINIBUS*: AMBROSE AND THE ROMAN CHURCH

Ambrose of Milan was the first author after Damasus to produce an account of Agnes' martyrdom. The Catholic Church remembers Saint Ambrose as the first of its four *doctores*, and the preservation of his prolific body of work attests to his importance in church history. It is for this reason that Damasus' *elogium* is often overlooked or glossed over by scholars of hagiography, who are inclined to favor the lengthier work of a more prominent author. His earlier works tamed the quick anger of Gratian while his later works cajoled the powerful Theodosius for interfering in church governance. These aspects of his career are not in doubt; Ambrose's role in church history is concrete. It nevertheless cannot be forgotten that this brilliant bishop did not rise to power instantly but grew over the course of several years under the tutelage of other prominent bishops, especially Damasus, the bishop of Rome. This is the context that cannot be abandoned when reading Ambrose's own version of the Agnes martyrdom in his *De virginibus*—a public commemoration to virginity written to his sister after he served as bishop of Milan for only two years.

The modern biographers of Ambrose struggle with contextualizing such an important figure. The other major contributors to church writing in this period, men like Augustine and Jerome, are not nearly as elusive as Ambrose. This is because these men laid their lives bare at times in order to connect with their audience. It is somehow easier to relate to Augustine, recounting the sins of his youth, or Jerome, struggling with Cicero in attempt to purge himself of all pagan learning and thought, than it is to engage with Ambrose's ecumenical debates involving Arianism or proper liturgical practice. In 1935, Homes Dudden produced a magisterial multi-volume biography of Ambrose, which has

become the standard scholarly work on the subject. He offers lengthy quotations from Ambrose's more prominent works. This allows the reader to determine the character of Ambrose from his own words. Yet Dudden has come under attack by more modern authors who realize that this character of Ambrose is not so easy to recognize. Neil McLynn sees fault in Dudden's inability to read Ambrose's works with critical demeanor: "Its easy rhythms never properly engage the problems inherent with the evidence: by allowing Ambrose to speak for himself, it produces the terms which he himself set for the issues in which he was involved."<sup>153</sup> Ambrose was not an ascetic like Jerome, nor was he a teacher of rhetoric like Augustine. Ambrose was a Roman magistrate who became a bishop. He had a shrewd political mind. This fact is demonstrated by the delicate nature of his dealings with emperors and other important church figures.

Ambrose was born in the Roman city of Treverorum, modern Trier, to a noble Roman family. His father had obtained the rank of praetorian prefect of the Gauls, a title that demonstrates his family's political ties to the city of Rome and the imperial family.<sup>154</sup> His father died when he was still a child, leading him to move to Rome with his elder sister shortly afterwards. His sister Marcellina was consecrated as a virgin by Pope Liberius sometime in the late 350s. *De virginibus* recounts this consecration in detail along with a speech purportedly given by Pope Liberius to Marcellina at the time of the ceremony. John Moorehead describes the importance of such a connection with the bishopric of Rome:

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<sup>153</sup> Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in the Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994): xix.

<sup>154</sup> Homes Dudden, *Saint Ambrose: His Life and Times, Vol. 1* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1935): 1.

The involvement of the Pope may be a sign of the social standing of the family, and if we accept Paulinus' assertion that the bishops used to visit the family home (VAmb. 4.1) we have another sign of the family's standing in Christian circles in Rome.<sup>155</sup>

McLynn chooses to emphasize Ambrose's political background, while Moorehead emphasizes his Christian and theological background:

Whereas McLynn's Ambrose is approached in relation to people like the senator Symmachus rather than Augustine or Jerome, my attempt at placing him works in the other direction, approaching him as a thinker, in particular a commentator on the Bible.<sup>156</sup>

Neither of these characterizations is entirely wrong, but they are not entirely accurate either. Ambrose the politician should not be separated from Ambrose the thinker. It is important to stress this when examining the sparse evidence for his early career, especially in *De virginibus*.

#### FROM MAGISTRATE TO BISHOP

The early years of Ambrose's life are left almost entirely to the whim of later fanciful hagiographies of the great bishop. The hagiographers Paulinus and Rufinus couch his early life with miraculous tales. Rufinus recounts one particular miracle, which occurred the day of his selection as bishop. After the death of Auxentius, the former Arian bishop of Milan, a dove descended upon Ambrose's head revealing the divine will behind his appointment. Interestingly enough, Ambrose resisted accepting the bishopric, but was forced to do so by the overwhelming demand from the people who witnessed this miracle.<sup>157</sup> Ambrose had just launched into a career as consular magistrate along with his

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<sup>155</sup> John Moorehead, *Ambrose: Church and Society in the Late Roman World* (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 1999): 21.

<sup>156</sup> Moorehead, 21.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

brother Saturus under the Roman consul Probus.<sup>158</sup> This suggests that Ambrose was initially unwilling to become a bishop. In fact, he was not even baptized at the time of this appointment. It was not uncommon at this time for adults to put off baptism for as long as possible. This is a trait which Ambrose shared with several emperors and other political figures who understood that sin could never be fully divorced from public life. Perhaps Rufinus intended this particular story to exemplify Ambrose's desire to lead a secular life over a religious one, but it could also be used to characterize a bishop who clung to his early life as a Roman magistrate and brought that knowledge to his episcopal duties.

Ambrose became bishop of Milan in 374. From 374 to 380 only two major works by Ambrose survive: *De excessu fratris* and *De virginibus*. *De excessu fratris* is a lengthy, public epitaph to his deceased brother Saturus and *De virginibus* is an even lengthier letter written to his sister Marcellina back in Rome. Both of these documents appear at first glance to be of a personal nature, but their length and writing style quickly reveal them to be documents intended for a public audience. Both works reference other biblical and classical material, and both express deeper purposes than their outward subject. A detailed look at *De virginibus* will come later, but for now we may consider the example of *De excessu fratris*. It has the outward appearance of a pagan *consolatio*, but in the work Ambrose maneuvers his excessive mourning into a lengthy diatribe on why Christians have no need to mourn for the dead because the resurrection is soon to come. Ambrose relies heavily on the teaching of Paul, the *Song of Songs* and *Genesis*, as well as the classics of Ovid and Cicero, to create a masterful and unique piece of

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<sup>158</sup> Moorehead, 22.

literature.<sup>159</sup> According to McLynn, Ambrose used the public narration of his brother's distinguished career to help anchor his family to his newly adopted home: "Saturus had been the glory not only of his own family but the whole *patria* (27); in death he became the property of Milan, the city's talisman."<sup>160</sup> With this work, Ambrose inaugurates a writing career of deep complexity, which is often difficult to interpret even when abundant sources are available for context.

The amount of surviving literature starts to increase around 379 to 380, when Ambrose begins to involve himself in affairs beyond the city of Milan itself. This appears to begin with his first encounter with the young western emperor Gratian in 378. Gratian met with Ambrose on his march to reinforce Valens in the east against the Goths. At this meeting, the young emperor asked Ambrose to produce a detailed instructional book on the orthodox faith. This project would evolve into Ambrose's *De Fide*. After reading the first two hastily written books of *De Fide*, Gratian was so impressed that he held a second meeting with Ambrose in 379. According to Dudden, as a result, Gratian decided to drastically alter his policy on religious tolerance:

Such a sudden and total abandonment of the policy of religious neutrality, which he had inherited from his father and which he himself hitherto scrupulously observed, seemed almost inexplicable unless it be attributed to the powerful influence of Ambrose.<sup>161</sup>

This point of view is heavily influenced by later sources on Ambrose, like Paulinus and Rufinus, which have a somewhat skewed view of the bishop's early career. According to McLynn, Gratian asked Ambrose to produce a detailed explanation of his faith because

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<sup>159</sup> Moorehead, 38.

<sup>160</sup> McLynn, 74.

<sup>161</sup> Dudden, 192.

his critics had warned the new emperor of his heretical views.<sup>162</sup> This would suggest that Ambrose was not so influential over Gratian, at least not at such an early date. Ambrose nevertheless capitalizes on the attention and quickly gains Gratian's confidence by providing him not only a small declaration of faith but also a huge multi-volume testament to his orthodoxy.

Ambrose then corralled Gratian's newfound confidence into support for an ecumenical council against one of his leading opponents. The Council of Aquileia in 381 was originally an attempt made by Gratian to convene a church-wide council of eastern and western bishops to deal with doctrinal issues. Once Theodosius came to power after the death of Valens in 378, he took steps to champion orthodoxy at an eastern capital still heavily influenced by Arianism. After a squabble during his triumphal entrance into Constantinople in 380 ended in a schism with *homoean* bishop Demophilus, Theodosius decided to convene his own church-wide council in 381. He invited over one hundred and fifty bishops from both eastern and western Christendom. This new council at Constantinople supplanted Gratian's council at Aquileia. It was at this point that Ambrose stepped in and offered a way for Gratian to save face. The council was still convened, but it was decided that because it only involved western Italian affairs it could be left in the hands of the local Italian episcopates. According to McLynn, the council's reduced attendance was a deliberate machination on the part of Ambrose in an attempt to ensure that it would be stocked with his own supporters. What ensued was essentially a witch-hunt directed at Palladius, the elderly bishop of Rattaria who was Ambrose's most outspoken critic.<sup>163</sup> Palladius was completely unprepared for the interrogation he

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<sup>162</sup> McLynn, 98-102; Moorehead accepts McLynn's argument, Moorehead, 113.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-125.



received at the hands of Ambrose and his supporters who subsequently reported the bishop's Arian leanings to Gratian.<sup>164</sup> As a result, Gratian continued to support this council of western bishops which appeared to get results from its interrogations.

The notion of a council of western bishops exercising judicial authority over matters of heresy had, in fact, already been established by Damasus as early as 376. At that point in time, Damasus was still under pressure from remnants of the Ursinus faction in Rome as well as Donatists from North Africa. McLynn points out Damasus' adroit sense of timing in petitioning a young and inexperienced emperor at exactly that moment:

This latter request apparently sought to take advantage of the fact that Gratian was temporarily legislating for both the eastern and western halves of the empire. The emperor duly endorsed Rome's claim to hear the cases of deposed bishops in the western provinces—and the metropolitans of the east.<sup>165</sup>

Damasus had already set the precedent for what Ambrose was attempting to achieve.

McLynn suggests that Ambrose was probably involved in this council of 376 and therefore knew what he could expect Gratian to concede to.<sup>166</sup>

Ambrose intended to use the Council of Aquileia in a similar way. Since the subject of Arianism had already been broached, Ambrose began to write letters with the authority of the bishops of Aquileia in order to extend its judgment to eastern matters. According to McLynn, Damasus lent his support to the proceedings as well: "Ambrose and his friends had secured authorization from Damasus to hear the case of bishop Leontius of Salona, but when they voted to depose him he departed for Rome, where he was received into communion with the pope."<sup>167</sup> Damasus' behavior is somewhat puzzling, but it seems he used Aquileia to draw Leontius under his own control. This

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<sup>164</sup> McLynn, 125-26.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-37.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

behavior can best be understood after examining what happened next. Ambrose sent a letter in the name of the council addressed to Gratian, Theodosius and Valentinian II, asking them to intervene in the matter of the heretical fracturing of the eastern church:

However, we have indeed learned with highest joy and celebration that the Arians who had violently invaded the Church have been ejected, that the sacred temples of God are frequented only by Catholics. But, since the jealousy of the devil is never accustomed to silence, we have heard that there are frequent dissensions and warlike discord among Catholics.

*In Orientalibus autem partibus cognovimus quidem summo gaudio atque laetitia, eiectis Arianis qui Ecclesias violenter invaserat, sacra Dei templa per solos catholicos frequentari. Sed tam quoniam invidia diabolis numquam quiescere solet, inter catholicos audimus crebras dissensiones esse, impacatamque discordiam.*<sup>168</sup>

These *dissensiones* are vague, but based on later events, it becomes clear that they refer to the problematic succession to the bishopric of Antioch, where both Melitius and Paulinus served as bishop of the *homoean* faction. McLynn credits Ambrose with devising this as a way to further bolster the young Gratian in the eyes of his eastern colleague: “The council of Alexandria would be at most an adjunct to Aquileia, to complete its work and reassure its members; by convening it Theodosius would be conferring belated recognition upon the authority of Gratian’s council.”<sup>169</sup>

Recognition of Gratian’s authority was also recognition of Ambrose’s authority in this matter. Dudden illuminates the episode further, suggesting that Ambrose and his fellow Italian bishops had no idea of the quagmire they were launching into. By the time the council’s letter was dispatched, Melitus had already died and an independent council at Constantinople had established a proper successor.<sup>170</sup> The council of Aquileia’s letter urged the recognition of Paulinus, but it was too late, and its insistence only served to

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<sup>168</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” 13.3-4. *PLL* 16, 988.

<sup>169</sup> McLynn, 141.

<sup>170</sup> Dudden, 210.

complicate matters. A new presbyter named Flavian had been appointed at Constantinople to replace Paulinus entirely.<sup>171</sup>

The next letter from Ambrose's council was just as damaging to his reputation among eastern bishops. An unusual character named Maximus the Cynic had emerged in Alexandria, claiming to merge Cynic philosophy with Nicene Christianity. According to Dudden, Peter, the bishop of Alexandria, intended to use this figure to gain control over the church of Constantinople.<sup>172</sup> He sent Maximus to the church of Constantinople, currently under the control of the elderly Gregory of Nazianus. Maximus proved to be a popular figure there, and as soon as Gregory took ill, Maximus attempted to have himself recognized as the new bishop.<sup>173</sup> Theodosius and the rest of the eastern bishops saw right through this plot and had Maximus exiled from the city. It was at this point that Maximus decided to travel back to Alexandria to look for further support from Peter. After attempting to stir the crowd up against his former patron, Maximus was ejected from that city as well. Once Gregory Nazianus resigned his see, Theodosius moved to have a catechumen named Nectarius take his place. Maximus used this as an opportunity to use western support to revive his claim over the see at Constantinople. Once again, Ambrose and the other bishops at Aquileia acted without full knowledge: "For Bishop Maximus of the Alexandrine church, who has remained in communion with us, has read letters from the holy memory of Peter," *Namquam in consilio nuper, cum Maximus episcopus Alexandrinae Ecclesiae communionem manere secum, lectis Petri sanctae memoriae viri*

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<sup>171</sup> Dudden, 208.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 209-10.

*litteris*.<sup>174</sup> Maximus had fooled the council into giving him their full support.<sup>175</sup> Damasus appears to have been aware of the trickster and knew to avoid involving himself.<sup>176</sup>

The Council's ineptitude in these affairs led to its dissolution in 381. Many of the bishops involved voiced their opinions over the general lack of respect they received from their eastern counterparts. In response, Ambrose demanded a council of eastern and western bishops to convene at Rome.<sup>177</sup> According to McLynn, Ambrose cleverly distracted Theodosius from his previous ineptitude by focusing his attention on the Apollinarian heresy: "He drew the emperor's attention to a heresy that had never been discussed at a general council and whose advocates had escaped direct confutation."<sup>178</sup> This gathering of eastern and western bishops was the Council of Rome in 382 mentioned in the previous chapter. Although Damasus had only participated marginally in these events, he stood to benefit the most from this council because it helped bolster his authority as the premier bishop of western Christendom. It is hard not to see a similarity in how Damasus dealt with bishop Leontius. By letting his brash colleague act out against heresy, Damasus could curry favor by taking a more diplomatic posture. In just eight years, Ambrose had done much to extend his prestige throughout the Christian world. He nevertheless still leaned heavily on the authority of the senior bishop of Rome as late as 382.

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<sup>174</sup> Ambrosius, "Epistolae," 13.3. *PLL* 16.

<sup>175</sup> Dudden, 210-11.

<sup>176</sup> Damasus, "Epistolae," 6. *PLL* 13, 369-70.

<sup>177</sup> Ambrosius, "Epistolae," 14, *PLL* 16.

<sup>178</sup> McLynn, 143.

## AMBROSE AND *DE VIRGINIBUS*

These events, taking place in the first eight years of Ambrose's tenure as bishop, help establish his character when he produced *De virginibus*. This work was the first that can be credited to him, predating his funeral oration to Saturus by at least one year.<sup>179</sup> He claims to have been "not three years a bishop," *nondum triennialis sacerdos*, in the midst of the text itself, allowing the scholar to date it roughly to the year 376.<sup>180</sup> As the oldest major work from Ambrose to survive, *De virginibus* demonstrates his desire to deliver eastern ideas to a western audience. Dudden and many of the older biographers and historians studying the text of *De virginibus* considered it to be a later compilation of three sermons written for his sister for the feast day of Saint Agnes on the 21 January 376.<sup>181</sup> A discovery made by Bishop Lefort of Louvain at the White Monastery at Sohaq in 1929 dramatically changed the scholarly perspective on this work. Lefort discovered a highly fragmentary Coptic text written by Athanasius, which appeared to follow *De virginibus* in both form and content. This discovery convinced Lefort that Ambrose copied the work into Latin for a western audience, thus robbing the great church doctor of his originality. This position proved untenable however because Yves-Marie Duval offered proof of the originality displayed in Ambrose's adaptation of the Athanasius text, which came to be known as the Coptic *Lettre aux vierge*:

Si á s'en tenir ici aux grandes masses, Ambroise emprunte à la *Lettre* d'Athanase des pans entier, il les dispose autrement dans sa construction, déplace les elements, sort les pages qu'il utilise de leur contexte originel.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Angelo Paredi, *Saint Ambrose: His Life and Times*, M. Costelloe, S.J. trans. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1964): 170.

<sup>180</sup> Migne, ed., Ambrosius, "De virginibus ad Marcelliam sororem suam," 2.6.39, *PLL* 16.

<sup>181</sup> Dudden, 695.

<sup>182</sup> Yves-Marie Duval, *Ambroise de Milan: Dix Études* (University of Paris, 1974): 53-54.

Duval demonstrates that Ambrose used the authoritative words of Athanasius of Alexandria and even Cyprian of Carthage to establish a standard rule for the practice of female asceticism. He identifies large portions of the text that are clearly composed by Ambrose alone, along with subtle changes in theology more befitting of Ambrose's later works than those of Athanasius.<sup>183</sup>

The three books of *De virginibus* must now be examined in detail to determine the unique themes presented by Ambrose. This will also reveal why the works of Athanasius and Cyprian are not sufficient in and of themselves to serve his Roman audience. Book one of *De virginibus* is primarily the exclusive work of Ambrose. Although some general themes from Athanasius' *Lettre* find their way into this book, Ambrose primarily uses this portion of the work to establish his own unique thesis. It also contains Ambrose's own narrative account of Agnes' martyrdom. It is therefore the most important book to this particular study. In the opening of the book, Ambrose emphasizes his own unworthiness in true rhetorical fashion, but with one subtle addition that helps establish a theme running through the entire work. His *proemium* attempts to explain why he chose to adapt his sermon into a written work: "Whence there was a certain consideration for writing, since our voice is a greater danger to modesty than what is written; indeed a book does not increase this danger." *Unde scribendi aliquid sententia fuit. Majore siquidem pudoris periculo auditur vox nostra quam legitur; liber enim non erubescit.*<sup>184</sup> Ambrose chooses to write because it helps preserve both his modesty and the modesty of his chaste audience. This emphasis on *pudoris* or "modesty" will reoccur throughout the work and will be a major factor in Ambrose's own interpretation of feminine sanctity.

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<sup>183</sup> Duval, 22, 28-36, 53-54.

<sup>184</sup> Ambrosius, "De virginibus," I.1.1., *PLL*, 16.

Agnes is introduced in the second chapter. He offers her as an example of virginity for *all* Christians to admire, not only for the virgin ascetic: “It is the birthday of Holy Agnes. Let men marvel, let children not despair, let the married be astounded, let the unmarried imitate.” *Natalis est sanctae Agnes, mirentur viri, non desperent parvuli; stupeant nuptae, imitentur innuptae.*<sup>185</sup> Why is this martyr so important? Why does she stand first in a long list many other paragons of feminine virtue? It is not a stretch to think that the very notion of feminine *virtus* in the Christian sense is created in this particular work. Since her very name embodies the most important quality of the virgin as Ambrose sees it: “The name of the virgin is the title of modesty.” *Nomen virginis est titulus pudoris.*<sup>186</sup> The latin word *titulus* translated as title, denotes the image of a title on a printed page, but it could also mean epitaph or stone engraving. One wonders if this is not some vague reference to her Damasan *titulus* which would be well known to a Roman audience. Regardless, he makes it clear that she is in some sense the *titulus* of his entire work. He would not put this kind of emphasis on her at the beginning of the work if she were not pivotal to the work itself.

Ambrose begins by stating that the details of her story were “handed down,” *traditur* to him from another source.<sup>187</sup> It is reasonable to assume that the popularity or *fama* of the martyr expressed in the Damasan *elogium* had also influenced Ambrose while he lived in the city. Both Ambrose and Damasus emphasize the extreme youth of Agnes at the time of her execution. In Damasus she was plucked from the lap of the nurse, *a nutricis gremium*, while Ambrose claims she is “twelve years old,” *duodecim*

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<sup>185</sup> Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” I.2.5.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., I.2.6.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., I.2.7.

*annorum*.<sup>188</sup> Yet her youth and virginity are the only aspects of her character which the two accounts share. Although there is little narrative detail present in either account, the characterization of Agnes differs drastically between the two versions. This is due to the subtle influence of Ambrose on the text.

Agnes is a paragon of virginity in both accounts. Although each author emphasizes her extreme youth, it is clear that her martyrdom is brought about because she spurns some type of sexual advance from her persecutors. Unfortunately, the details are sparse in the *elogium*. Damasus simply states that she used her “profuse locks,” *profusos crines* to cover her “nude limbs,” *Nudaque... membra*.<sup>189</sup> Ambrose mentions marriage more overtly in his account: “She thus was not propelled to the marriage bed. As a virgin she would not be propelled to her place of supplication with a joyful step, but with a hurried gait, the virgin proceeded, not with hair made elegant by twisted locks but by Christ,” *Non sic ad thalamum nupta properaret ut ad supplicii locum laeta successu, gradu festina virago processit, non intorto crine caput compta, sed Christo*.<sup>190</sup> Ambrose has Agnes actively avoiding marriage and embracing the “hurried gait” of martyrdom as opposed to being forced down a path to a “place of supplication.” Ambrose deals with marriage at great length in *De virginibus*. It is his purpose to promote virginity as a more elevated, Christian lifestyle for women. He thus uses the story of Agnes as an example to be imitated.

Ambrose also adds detail to the events leading up to the martyrdom which are not present in the Damasus’ *elogium*. This is to be expected in part because Ambrose is writing a lengthy sermon, while Damasus was confined to a small poetic inscription.

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<sup>188</sup> Damasus, “Carmen XXIX,” *PLL* 13; Ambrosius, “De Viriginibus,” I.2.7, *PLL* 16.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” I.2.8.



Damasus mentions the “holy parents,” *Sanctos... parentes*, of Agnes who “related,” *retulisse* the account of her death, but this is all that he has to say about them.<sup>191</sup> The fact that he refers to them as “holy” suggests that they approved and supported her decision, but there is no definitive answer to this in the poem itself. Ambrose suggests a different relationship between Agnes and her parents: “But girls of this age are not even able to bear the stern faces of their parents.” *At istius aetatis puellae torvos etiam vultus parentem ferre non possunt*. Ambrose writes this line to set up a contrast with Agnes “who is fearless in the cruel hands of the butcher,” *Haec inter cruentas carnificum impavidum manus*.<sup>192</sup> Why have these meager details about Agnes’ familial background been altered? Because Ambrose recognizes that many of the women he is addressing are also pressured by their families not to embrace virginity. He concludes his first book by urging the virgin to remain steadfast in her chastity even when confronted by opposition from her family:

It is also a good thing if the parent inspires an eagerness for virginity like a favorable wind, but it is more glorious if the tender fire of age should be seized in a kindling of chastity even *without* the willing nourishing of the elders.

*Bona itaque si virgini studia parentem quasi flabra pudoris aspirant, sed illud gloriosius si tenerae ignis aetatis etiam sine veteribus nutrimentis sponte se rapiat in fomitem castitatis.*<sup>193</sup>

By concluding the first book in this way, Ambrose reveals a detail about his audience that was unknown before. He also reveals that he is willing to shape the details of his narrative to suite his own purposes.

Damasus portrays Agnes as a willful, powerful individual who stands up against tyranny: “She willingly *spurned* the rage and threats of a savage tyrant / She willed her

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<sup>191</sup> Damasus, “Carmen XXIX.”

<sup>192</sup> Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” I.2.7.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, I.11.62.

noble body to burn in flames. *Sponte trucis calcasse minas, rabiemque tyranni: / Urere cum flammis voluisset nobile corpus.*<sup>194</sup> Ambrose portrays her as a passive figure who accepts her fate:

She stood, she prayed, she bent down her neck. You could see the butcher grow frightened, as if he had been sentenced. You could see his right hand tremble, his face grow pale fearing foreign danger, while the girl feared not for her own.

*Stetit, oravit, cervicem inflexit. Cerneret trepidare carnifecem, quasi ipse addictus fuisset. Tremere percusoris dextram, pallere ora alieno tementis periculo, cum puella non temeret suo.*<sup>195</sup>

Not only do the characterizations differ, the endings differ as well. Both may reflect existing reports about the famous martyr's death, but there is nevertheless no way to verify which one is correct. It is sufficient to say that each intended to use the character for different purposes. Whereas Damasus defers to her ultimate power as a martyr of the church, Ambrose molds her character to suit his purposes. In his account she epitomizes "modesty," or *pudoris* even in death: "You have therefore in one host a double martyrdom, one of modesty and of religion," *Habetis igitur in una hostia duplex martyrium, pudoris et religionis*. The *martus* in a literal sense is a witness. Agnes bears witness not only to the Christian faith, *religionis*, but also to modesty itself, *pudoris*.<sup>196</sup>

The liberal use of *pudor* or modesty continues throughout the work. Although some modern translators choose to translate *pudor* as chastity rather than modesty, Ambrose frequently employs the Latin word *castus* when referring specifically to sexual abstinence. *Pudor* seems to denote a general quality—something much more important for the aspiring Christian ascetic to embrace. Ambrose emphasizes Agnes as an embodiment of this quality. His conclusion to her martyrdom is especially significant.

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<sup>194</sup> Damasus, "Carmen XXIX."

<sup>195</sup> Ambrosius, "De virginibus," I.2.9.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, I.2.9.

This is the first reference in hagiography to the “double martyrdom” or *duplex martyrium*. The double crown of the virgin martyr will emerge as a common motif in later hagiography. It is important to note that this double martyrdom is denoted by a combination of modesty and religion, while later references consider the double crown to represent triumph in retaining one’s virginity (i.e. chastity) and the act of death (i.e. martyrdom). This suggests that later hagiographies that employed this motif were influenced by this original reference to the *duplex martyrium*. The influence Ambrose has here will become more recognizable when other examples of this motif are analyzed later on.

Although Agnes is listed at the beginning of the work as a prime example of *pudor*, there are many other examples present as well. Christian saints and martyrs serve as positive examples for the aspiring virgin to imitate, while famous examples of pagan virginity are offered as flawed or insufficient examples for the young female initiate to avoid. Ambrose explains his reason for bombarding the reader with all of these virginal figures:

But since we are infirm in advising and unequal in teaching, for indeed he who teaches ought to excel over those whom he teaches, so that we do not appear to have abandoned our undertaken task or to have taken too much upon ourselves, we have judged that imbuing examples is better than imbuing precepts.

*Sed quoniam nos infirmi ad monendum sumus et impares ad docendum debet enim is qui docet supra cum qui docetur excellare, ne vel susceptum deseruisse munus, vel nobis arrogasse amplius videremur, exemplis potius quam praeceptis putavimus imbuendam.*<sup>197</sup>

Ambrose does not see himself as an authoritative voice in this matter; it therefore falls on historical example to do the job of teaching for him.

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<sup>197</sup> Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” 2.1.1.

The desire to teach not through pure instruction, but through historical example, makes this particular work remarkably similar to the genre of Roman historical writing established by Livy. Livy himself advised his reader that various *exempla* were a necessity to the proper study of history, “so that you might gaze upon examples of every sort as if they were placed upon illustrious monuments,” *omnis te exempli documenta in illustri posita monumento intueri*.<sup>198</sup> It was the job of the *exemplum* to teach proper *mores*, through both positive and negative demonstration: “From which you and your republic may grasp that which is to be imitated, and you may avoid those things foul in their result and foul in their completion.” *inde tibi tuaeque rei publicae quod imitere capias, inde foedum inceptu, foedum exitu quod vites*.<sup>199</sup> It is not surprising to see Roman historical motifs employed by a religious writer. Roman historians were in essence guardians of *mos maiorum*, making them *quasi* priestly figures themselves. In this work, Ambrose introduces himself as a Christian historian dedicated to providing a new type of *mores*—a moral or in this case ancestral behavior for young women to follow.

In the second book, Ambrose cites two primary examples for young virgins to imitate. The Virgin Mary is offered as an *exemplum* for proper living. Ambrose is particularly concerned with how the Virgin Mary handled her marriage:

How many types of virtue emanate from one Virgin? The secret of Modesty, the banner of faith the service of devotion, a virgin in the home, a companion in ministry, a mother at the temple.

*Quantae in unae virgine species virtutum emicant? Secretum verecundiae, vexillum fidei, devotiones obsequium, virgo intra domum, comes ad ministerium mater ad templum.*<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> B.O. Foster, ed., Livy, “Ab urbe condita,” Prae.10, *LCL* 49 (Cambridge University Press, 1949).

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>200</sup> Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” II.2.15.

Many of these qualities reflect the life of Mary as it is recorded in the gospels. Once again modesty plays a key role in Ambrose's writing. Mary's modesty is *secretum* because outwardly she appeared to be pregnant out of wedlock. She is a good *exemplum* because she retains this quality even though her reputation was suspect. The Virgin Mary is enigmatic in this way. The notion of a virgin mother is every bit as paradoxical as the trinity itself. Ambrose recognizes that this particular *exemplum* is also an unattainable one.

The paradox does not end here. Mary is viewed as both "ally to her son's ministry," *comes ad ministerium*, as well as "a virgin of the home," *virgo intra domum*. This seems to emphasize the orthodox belief that she remained a steadfast virgin throughout her marriage to Joseph even after the birth of Jesus. *Domus* implies an attachment to the household—a statement in direct contradiction with *comes ad ministerium*. How can she be bound to Joseph's household yet still participate in Jesus' itinerant ministry? Ambrose revels in this particular quality. Mary provides the perfect example of the domesticated *virgo*. One who is faithful and devoted to her spouse and also to her place in society itself. This is the essence of modesty as Ambrose sees it. According to Susanna Elm, Ambrose's must be completely separate from worldly affairs in order to maintain the purely virginal quality of modesty:

Virginité the representation of the sexually 'unmixed' and hence unpolluted body of Christ, was thus for Ambrose the most powerful bulwark against any weakening of those absolutes and against corruption and sin. And nowhere did steadfastness of the church find a clearer symbol than in the sacred, pure body of a 'virgin of God.'<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1994): 381.

The virgins he writes to are ascetics who are held in high regard, but they must not overstep their societal bounds. Every virgin is—after all—simply a bride to Christ. Ambrose envisions a Virgin Mary who exults the newest members of her holy household:

Oh how many virgins shall she meet, how many having embraced shall she draw to the Lord, saying: “This girl has served the marriage bed of my son, she has served this nuptial bed chamber with immaculate modesty.”

*O quantis illa virginibus occurret, quantas complexa ad Dominum trahet, dicens: Haec thorum filii mei, haec thalamos nuptiales immaculato servavit pudore.*<sup>202</sup>

Through the mouth of the Virgin Mary herself, Ambrose tells the audience of this work that the best *virgo* is the one who above all is obedient to male patriarchy.

The next key *exemplum* in *De virginibus* helps exemplify the relationship Ambrose is trying to establish between modesty and female asceticism. Whereas Mary is offered up as an *exemplum* for proper living, Thecla is seen as the perfect *exemplum* for dying:

Therefore may Holy Mary instruct you in the discipline of life. Let Thecla teach you how to be sacrificed, she who fleeing marital relations, and damned by the furor of her spouse, even changed the nature of the beasts with the veneration of her virginity.

*Ergo Sancta Maria disciplinam vitae informet, Thecla doceat immolari, quae copulam fugiens nuptialem, et sponsi furore damnata, naturam etiam bestiarum virginitatis veneratione mutavit.*<sup>203</sup>

Strangely, Ambrose has nothing more to say about Thecla; where he dedicated entire chapters to Agnes and Mary, he only makes one brief statement about one specific part of Thecla’s story. Thecla would appear to be the perfect ascetic, considering the fact that she led her life as many of the famous holy men of her time did, living isolated from the world. She is problematic for Ambrose because she is also credited with preaching and

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<sup>202</sup> Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” 2.2.16

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 2.3.19.

baptizing. She is not a meek figure, submissive to authority. She is therefore not a particularly useful *exemplum* to Ambrose.

If Thecla was a problem for Ambrose then why use her at all? In fact, Auxentius the Arian bishop of Milan who preceded Ambrose seems to have widely endorsed Thecla. He even dedicated his cathedral church in Milan to her, something Ambrose never mentions in his extensive body of writing.<sup>204</sup> Leonie Hayne points out the difficulty Ambrose had with Thecla: “It is tempting to suggest he was promoting as a rival virgin/martyr, for in a letter written in 386, he gives Thecla, Agnes and Pelagia as examples of martyrs contemptuous of death.”<sup>205</sup> According to Hayne, Ambrose always sidelines Thecla and emphasizes other similar martyrs in order to avoid the subject: “In short, Thecla could not possibly be ignored by the bishop of Milan, but she does not stand alone in the center of the stage.”<sup>206</sup> This is a compelling if not entirely provable hypothesis. It nevertheless may help explain what Ambrose chooses to do next in *De virginibus*.

Immediately after this brief *exemplum*, Ambrose jumps to another one, explaining to his audience that Thecla and Mary are too lofty for emulation: “Someone will say: ‘Why have you offered the example of Mary... why even the example of Thecla whom the Doctor of the gentiles trained?’” *Dicet aliquis: cur exemplum attulisti Mariae...cur etiam Theclae quam gentium Doctor instituit?* Ambrose then gives a lengthy description of an anonymous and recent martyrdom at Antioch. This Virgin of Antioch does not appear to mirror any known historical martyr, nor is she mentioned before Ambrose or by any of his contemporaries. She appears to be a complete fiction on the part of Ambrose:

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<sup>204</sup> Leonie Hayne, “Thecla and the Church Fathers,” *Vigiliae Christianae* Vol. 48, No. 3 (Sept., 1994): 211.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

A fictitious, unnamed martyr to help serve as a more satisfying *exemplum* than the well known but controversial Thecla. This Virgin of Antioch encounters the same problem with preserving her virginity that Thecla and Agnes had. She handles the problem in a manner more befitting of the character Ambrose is trying to establish. She does not, “willingly *spurn* the rage and threats of a savage tyrant,” as did Damasus’ Agnes.<sup>207</sup> She does not stand up and tame the beasts of the arena as Thecla did. Instead, she acts in a similar manner to the modest Agnes of Ambrose’s first chapter: Behold the persecution,

Behold the persecution. The girl unaware of how to flee, certainly afraid that she might fall to plotters against her modesty, prepared her spirit for virtue. So religious that she did not fear death, so modest that she awaited it.

*Ecce persecutio, Puella fugere nescia, certe pavidam, ne incideret insidiatores pudoris, animam ad virtutem paravit, tam religiosa, ut mortem non timeret: tam pudica, ut expectaret.*<sup>208</sup>

The exact same interplay between *religio* and *pudor* found in the *duplex martyr* of the Agnes account resurfaces here. Her sense of duty, in this case *religio*, is something a Roman audience, which admired the *pietas* of a character like Aeneas, might find appealing. It is nevertheless her modesty Ambrose chooses to focus on. Since Ambrose has complete authorial control over this nameless virgin, her *pudor* can now take center stage.

The *insidiatores* mentioned in the account do in fact plot against the virgin’s modesty. They force her to choose between the two virtues that define her: “They sentenced the virgin either to sacrifice or to prostitute herself at a brothel,” *Aut sacrificare virginem, aut lupinari prostitui iubent.*<sup>209</sup> Once again, a shy, virginal figure is praised for submitting to her fate: “She cried, she remained silent, so that the adulterer

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<sup>207</sup> Damasus, “Carmen XXIX.”

<sup>208</sup> Ambrosius, “De. Virginibus,” 2.4.23.

<sup>209</sup> Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” 2.4.23.



might not hear her speaking. She did not choose the wrong done to her modesty, but refused the wrong done to Christ,” *Flevit, tacuit ne eam vel loquentem adulter audiret, nec pudoris elegit inuriam, sed Christum recusavit.*<sup>210</sup> She ultimately escapes this fate not through a divine sign of her authority but through the intervention of a man. This man turned out to be a Christian soldier who wanted to help her escape: “Let us change clothes; Give yours to me and mine to you: and each for Christ. Your clothes will make me a true soldier and mine will make you a virgin,” *Vestimenta mutemus; conveniunt mihi tua et mea tibi: sed utraque Christo. Tua vestis me verum militem faciet, mea te virginem.*<sup>211</sup> The virgin initially accepts this offer, deciding to leave the soldier to be caught in her place. She then realizes that she cannot allow this man to take her place and decides to go back to him. She explains her decision to return in the final moments leading up to their impending martyrdom: “I avoided disgrace not martyrdom. I handed over my clothes to you, not my profession,” *Ego opprobrium declinavi, non martyrium. Tibi cessi vestem, non professionem mutavi.*<sup>212</sup> The story ends with the virgin and soldier dying together.

This unusual episode is closely related to the Agnes account through the interwoven themes of modesty and religion. Unlike Agnes, Ambrose has the Virgin of Antioch choose between the two. This account is also reminiscent of another famous martyr Passion. Much like Thecla in Milan, the martyr Perpetua enjoyed a great deal of popularity in North Africa at this time. Lucy Grig mentions Perpetua and Thecla as having the most popular female martyr cults in the fourth century alongside the cult of

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 2.4.25.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 2.4.29.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 2.4.32.

Agnes at Rome.<sup>213</sup> Augustine, who was a student under Ambrose for a time, wrote several sermons in response to the popularity of her feast day. Although there is no direct evidence of a connection between the *Passio Perpetuae* and *De virginibus*, it is difficult to ignore some of the connections between these two texts. In the *Passio Perpetuae*, Perpetua has a vision of her impending struggle in the arena. In order to prepare for the fight she is attended to by the “patrons and assistants,” *adiutores et fautores*, of a gladiator. They then remove her clothing to prepare her for the upcoming fight. “And I was stripped down and made masculine,” *et expoliata sum et facta sum masculus*.<sup>214</sup> Perpetua seems to link her loss of clothing to a loss of gender or station. The same thing happens when the virgin of Antioch and the soldier strip down and change clothing: yours will make me a true soldier and mine will make you a virgin,” *Tua vestis me verum militem faciet, mea te virginem*.<sup>215</sup> The difference is Perpetua embraces her transformation and fights as a soldier of Christ. The virgin of Antioch however finds victory in her refusal to change: I handed over my garments to you not my profession, *Tibi cessi vestem, non professionem mutavi*.<sup>216</sup>

The death of Agnes, changed in *De virginibus* from the death recorded on the *elogium*, also shares some interesting qualities with the *Passio Perpetuae*. The unknown narrator of the *Passio* describes the power and defiance of Perpetua’s gaze: “Perpetua was following with a shining countenance and a bright gait, as a matron of Christ, a favorite of God, *Sequebatur Perpetua lucido uultu et placido incessu ut matrona Christi*,

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<sup>213</sup> Grig, 79.

<sup>214</sup> “Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis,” X, 7, in J.A. Robinson., *The Passion of Perpetua* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2004)

<sup>215</sup> Ambrosius, “De. Virginibus,” 2.4.29

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.4.32.

*ut Dei delicata.*<sup>217</sup> This contrasts starkly with both Agnes and the virgin of Antioch, who lower their heads as a sign of their modesty. The virgin of Antioch does so when she is first confronted by the *insidiatores*: “But when they saw the constancy of her profession, the fear of her modesty, her increasing blushes at being looked upon...” *Sed ubi viderunt constantiam professionis, metum pudoris, paratum ad cruciatus erubescens ad aspectus...*<sup>218</sup>

Agnes shows her modesty at the end of her account when she prepares for the fall of the butcher’s sword:

She stood, she prayed, she bent down her neck. You could see the butcher grow frightened, as if he had been sentenced. You could see his right hand tremble, his face grow pale fearing foreign danger, while the girl feared not for her own.

*Stetit, oravit, cervicem inflexit. Cerneret trepidare carnifecem, quasi ipse addictus fuisset. Tremere percussoris dextram, pallere ora alieno temeris periculo, cum puella non temeret suo.*<sup>219</sup>

The episode is surprisingly reminiscent of Perpetua’s death. In both cases the martyr must face death at the trembling hands of an inexperienced executioner, but the way they approach that death is entirely different:

Perpetua, however, so that she might taste something of pain, having been struck on her [collar] bone she cried out, and she herself bore the inexperienced gladiator’s wandering hand to her own neck.

*Perpetua autem, ut aliquid doloris gustaret, inter ossa conpuncta exulauit, et errantem dexteram tirunculi gladiatoris ipsa in iugulum suum transtulit.*<sup>220</sup>

Perpetua takes the sword of the trembling gladiator to her own neck, a deed which the narrator of the *Passio* explains could not have been achieved any other way: “Perhaps so

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<sup>217</sup> “Passio S. Perpetuae,” XVIII,1.

<sup>218</sup> Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” 2.4.23.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 1.2.9.

<sup>220</sup> “Passio S. Perpetuae,” XXI, 9.

great a woman could not have been killed otherwise, who was feared by the unclean spirit, if she had not herself willed it,” *Fortasse tanta femina aliter non potuisset occidi, quae ab immundo spiritu timebatur, nisi ipsa uoluisset.*<sup>221</sup> These two accounts have so much in common it is hard not to see one as a response to the other.

It is unclear if Ambrose knew the details surrounding Perpetua’s martyrdom, as he never mentions her in any of his writings, but there is ample evidence to suggest that he was influenced by the North African literature of Tertullian and Cyprian. These figures were also preoccupied with issues of feminine modesty as can be attested by Tertullian’s *De virginibus vellandis* and Cyprian’s *De habitu virginum*. In addition to Athanasius’ *Lettre aux vierges*, Yves-Marie Duval also identified several passages in *De virginibus* lifted directly from Cyprian’s *De habitu virginum*.<sup>222</sup> This connection is noteworthy because Cyprian’s *De habitu virginum* is a didactic text on feminine modesty. Cyprian and Tertullian have both been seen as reactionary figures to the rather radical character of Perpetua.<sup>223</sup> Even if Ambrose had intimate knowledge of their work, it is reasonable to assume that he was aware of the famous North African martyr but simply chose to ignore her. Ambrose concocted and adapted martyr accounts in order to distract his readers from popular female figures like Perpetua and Thecla. As a Roman martyr whose life was remembered imperfectly, Agnes could therefore be molded into the perfect exemplar for the western sphere of Christianity dominated by the Roman church.

The third book of *De virginibus* is the one most heavily influenced by both Cyprian and Athanasius. This is mainly due to a pivotal episode involving Pope Liberius. In an effort to give instruction to young Christian women while retaining his own

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<sup>221</sup> “Passio S. Perpetuae,” XXI, 10.

<sup>222</sup> Yves-Marie Duval, 21-29.

<sup>223</sup> Rex Butler, *The Passion of Perpetua*.

modesty, Ambrose turns to another more authoritative figure—the bishop of Rome.

Liberius was the Pope who gave the veil to his sister Marcellina, and because Marcellina is the outward addressee of the work Ambrose recalls the speech Liberius delivered at the event:

Since we have digressed in the two previous books, it is time, Holy Sister to return to those precepts of Liberius of blessed memory, which you are accustomed to confer with me, so that through a Holier man, one might approach weightier speech.

*Quoniam quae habuimus superioribus duobus digessimus, tempus est, soror sancta ea quae mecum conferre soles, beatæ memoriae Liberii praecepta revolvere; ut quo vir santior, eo sermo accedat gratior.*<sup>224</sup>

Ambrose has given his *exempla* and must now turn to the task of teaching in a more direct manner. He does not consider himself worthy of this task, so he uses the “holier” figure of Liberius to convey his *praecepta*.

The speech that follows is not a historically accurate account of Ambrose’s earlier encounter with this bishop. Athanasius’ *Lettre aux vierges* contains a similar speech which he claimed came from his predecessor Alexander of Antioch.<sup>225</sup> In both cases the writer has chosen to deliver a set of precepts on proper virgin conduct by speaking through an authoritative predecessor. Ambrose was clearly inspired to follow suit, choosing the bishop of Rome as the ultimate authority in this matter. Yet the content of Ambrose’s speech differs from Athanasius in that it borrows heavily from Cyprian’s *De habitu virginum*. Duval identifies a key passage linking the two works: “A virgin should not only *be* a virgin, she should be perceived and believed to be one, No one who sees a virgin should doubt that she is a virgin.” *Virgo non esse tantum sed et intellegi debet et*

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<sup>224</sup> Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” 3.1.1.

<sup>225</sup> Yves-Marie Duval, 50.

*credi. Nemo cum virginem viderit dubitet an virgo sit.*<sup>226</sup> This statement from Cyprian is echoed in Liberius' speech: "A virgin is not sufficiently true who must be inquired about when she is seen." *Non satis probabilis virgo est quae requiritur cum videtur.*<sup>227</sup> This statement sets the tone for Liberius' entire speech and fits well into Ambrose's overarching thesis on virginal modesty.

Ambrose has Liberius establish a set of principles for governing their lives. As the statement he dutifully lifts from Cyprian says, a virgin must demonstrate her virginity to the world. It is not enough to be a virgin, one must act the part. In order to achieve this one must outwardly exude that *pudor* or "modesty" Ambrose has constantly drawn the reader's attention to. According to Ambrose this modesty is demonstrated through bashful and above all silent behavior:

I should prefer speech to be absent from the virgin, rather than abound. For if women are commanded to remain silent in churches concerning even divine matters, and to ask their husbands at home what we consider to be the caution of virgins, in whom modesty adorns their age, and silence commends their modesty.

*Deesse igitur sermonem virgini, quam superesse malim, Nam si mulieres etiam de rebus divinis in ecclesia iubentur tacere, domi viros suos interrogare De virginibus quid cautum putamus, in quibus pudor ornat aeternam, taciturnitas commendat pudorem.*<sup>228</sup>

It is silence that commends modesty. The outward appearance of the virgin is one that embodies this principle:

Let virginity be signified first by the voice, let modesty close the mouth, let religion exclude weakness, and let habit instruct custom. Let her gravity first announce a virgin to me, by a modest approach, by a sober gait, by a bashful face; and let the sign of virtue be preceded by the pronouncement of integrity.

*Voce virginitas prima signetur, claudat ora pudor, debilitatem excludat religio, instituat consuetudo naturam. Virginem mihi prius gravitas sua nuntiet, pudore*

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<sup>226</sup> Cyprianus, "De habitu virginum," 5; Yves-Marie Duval, 24.

<sup>227</sup> Ambrosius, "De virginibus," III.3.13.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., III.3.9.

*obvio, gradu sobrio, vultu modesto; et praenuntia integretatis anteeant signa virtutis.*<sup>229</sup>

This understanding of virgin asceticism is reminiscent of Agnes and the Virgin of Antioch, but shares little with the popular figures of Perpetua and Thecla. Both of these women were known for speaking with authority in respect to their own Christian communities.

The Liberius speech in *De virginibus* is more than just a copy of an Athanasius text. It is in effect a Rule for female ascetics of the west crafted from vital eastern sources.<sup>230</sup> Ambrose shows discrimination in what sources he makes use of and what sources he chooses to ignore. He turns noteworthy quotations from Cyprian's *De habitu virginum* into precepts for his audience. All of these things attest to the originality of his project. The fact that Ambrose chooses to focus on female virginity and specifically female *exempla* is perhaps the strangest thing about this work. Athanasius approaches the subject of virginity with gender neutrality. G. Rosso demonstrates this particular change by examining the Old Testament *exempla* shared by both authors particularly that of the male prophet Elijah:

Si pensi per esempio al fatto che autore della Lettura alla Vergini cita fra I rari esempi di vita verginale nell' Antico Testamento solo figure maschili {oltre ad Elia sono menzionati infatti anche Eliseo, Geremia e Giovanni Battista}. Il vescovo di Milano invece ad eccezione di Elia nomina solo figure donne: Maria, sorella di Mosè, e vergini consecrati del tempio di Gerusalemme.<sup>231</sup>

Ambrose must have seen the need for a definitive rule for female asceticism at Rome itself around this time. The reason this issue was so important to him will become clear once his audience is examined in detail.

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<sup>229</sup> Ambrosius, "De virginibus," III.3.13.

<sup>230</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, 336-9.

<sup>231</sup> G. Rosso, "La 'Lettura alle Vergini' Anastasio e Ambrogio," *Augustinianum* (1983): 430-31.

## AMBROSE AND HIS ROMAN AUDIENCE

The year 376 has already been established as a concrete date for *De virginibus*. Ambrose thus composed this work before his exploits with Gratian led him to involve himself in the affairs of the greater church. Yet the work itself reveals that he was beginning to extend his interests to circles outside of Milan. The letter is addressed to his sister who lived in Rome. It was written specifically for the feast day of a Roman martyr; therefore, it can be assumed that he intended to address a Roman audience. Ambrose was familiar with his Roman audience having spent the better part of his life in that city. But why did a newly elected bishop of Milan see the need to address a Roman audience at all?

Perhaps the answer lies with a statement he makes in *De sacramentis*: “In all matters I desire to follow the Roman church, but nevertheless, we as human beings have sense.” *In omnibus cupio sequi ecclesiam Romana, sed tamen et nos homines sensum habemus.*<sup>232</sup> Ambrose makes this statement when being confronted with a divergence in practice with the traditional Roman liturgy.<sup>233</sup> He defends himself by claiming to follow the Roman traditions established by the apostle Peter even more rigorously than the Roman church itself: “In this matter we follow the Apostle Peter, to his devotion we cling. What does the Roman church say to this?” *Ipsium sequimur Apostolum Petrum, ipsius inhaeremus devotioni. Ad hoc ecclesia Romana quid respondet?*<sup>234</sup> This statement sums up Ambrose’s relationship with Rome. He sees himself as a vital part of the Roman church, and he has a responsibility to preserve its integrity. *De virginibus* is his first

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<sup>232</sup> Migne, ed., Ambrosius, “De sacramentis,” III.1.5., *PLL*, 433-434.

<sup>233</sup> Maura K. Lafferty, “Translating Faith from Greek to Latin: Romanitas and Chistianitas in Late Fourth-Century Rome and Milan,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* Vol. 11, No. 1 (2003): 45.

<sup>234</sup> Ambrosius, “De sacramentis,” 3.1.6., *PLL* 16.



attempt at preserving this integrity by addressing the female ascetic community at Rome through the influence of his older sister.

But with what authority does Ambrose address this audience? What does Ambrose have to offer the Roman church which it cannot receive from its own bishop? This question can only be answered when one considers Ambrose's understanding of Milan as a city and its relationship with a city like Rome. Milan at this time served a more important role in Roman imperial administration than Rome itself. This was because it was conveniently located at the convergence of most of the major northern roads. Morehead points out that it became the *de facto* capital of the western empire because of its link to Trier and Sermium: "As Milan was roughly midway between these two cities and at the center of a network of roads, emperors concerned with the security of the northern frontiers often lived there when in Italy."<sup>235</sup> In addition, these northern roads also linked Rome to the eastern port city of Ravenna. It was therefore a hub linking the eastern and western empire, and eastern and western Christianity as well. Ambrose no doubt saw an opportunity to be a spokesman for the east, assimilating eastern theology for a Roman audience.

The key figure in understanding Ambrose's audience is the aforementioned Marcellina. Ambrose had an interesting relationship with his older sister. Peter Brown applauds Ambrose for his familial devotion, noting that much of their correspondence preserves information vital to church history.<sup>236</sup> Brown considers Marcellina to be an essential part of Ambrose's episcopate: "For it was through Marcellina that Ambrose

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<sup>235</sup> Moorehead, 2.

<sup>236</sup> Peter Brown, *Body and Society*, 342.

chose to speak to Rome.”<sup>237</sup> Yet the relationship with his hallowed, older sibling presented a unique problem for Ambrose as well. His sister was a figure of some prestige in the Christian community well before Ambrose was even baptized. The transition from a spiritually subordinate role as a catechumen to a theologically superior one as a bishop must have been difficult for each of them to process. This perhaps sheds light on an interesting if not completely historical detail about Ambrose’s early life, preserved by the hagiographer Paulinus. According to Paulinus of Milan, the child Ambrose would act like a bishop in front of his older sister, forcing her to kiss his hand as if she were in audience before him: “When he saw the hands of the household priests being kissed by his mother or sister, he jokingly offered his own right hand,” *Cum videret sacerdotibus a domestica, sorore vel matre manus osculari, ipse ludens offerebat dexteram.*<sup>238</sup> The implication that Ambrose knew about or even desired this calling at such an early age is almost certainly untrue. Ambrose himself refutes this in his own writing. It nevertheless hints at certain tensions between the young bishop and his older ascetic sister.

Although Marcellina is the addressee of the work, it is unlikely that Ambrose composed *De virginibus* for her own personal instruction. Marcellina had lived as a consecrated virgin in Rome since he was a boy. *De virginibus* attempts to encourage virginity as a lifestyle to adopt, suggesting that it was targeted at recent converts or young Christian women not yet formally sworn to an ascetic lifestyle. Marcellina was probably serving in a supervisory role over younger female ascetics. She was therefore deferring to the authority and prestige of a bishop who conveniently happened to be a close relative. This would suggest that his reason for reaching out to a congregation other than his own

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>238</sup> Brown, *Body and Society*, 341.; Paulinus of Milan, “Vita Ambrosii,” 4.1, in A.A.R. Bastiaensen, ed. *Vita di Cipriano, Vita di Abrogio, Vita di Agostino* (Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 1989).

was purely personal. His sister asked for a well-crafted sermon for recent initiates and he simply provided it. Yet there is something in the tone of the work that suggests larger ambitions as well.

The elite citizens of the city of Rome were only beginning to adopt Christianity. It is impossible to pinpoint the exact religious demographics of the city. Alan Cameron points out that these figures were meaningless because those forced to convert to Christianity did not necessarily embrace it wholeheartedly: “The closing of the temples in the first half of the 390s marked the end of public paganism, but that tells us nothing about hearts and minds.”<sup>239</sup> The hearts and minds of Rome’s prestigious Senatorial class were battlefields to be fought over. The previous chapter discussed Pope Damasus’ strained relationship with the pagan Prefect Praetextatus. Ambrose also had to contend with Rome’s last great traditionalist—the Senator Quintus Aurelius Symmachus.

Emperor Gratian removed the Altar of Victory at Rome for the last time in 382. It had previously been removed by Constantius II in 357, but was restored once again by Julian. In 384, Symmachus, serving as Prefect of Rome after the death of Praetextatus, wrote to the emperor Valentinian II about restoring the Altar. He addresses the emperor under two distinct capacities: “Having functioned therefore in a two-fold office, I both serve as your prefect in public matters and also as a delegate I recommend a mandate of the citizens,” *Gemino igitur functus officio, et ut praefectus vester gesta publica prosequor, et ut legatus civium mandata commendo.*<sup>240</sup> Symmachus makes it clear to Valentinian II that he speaks not only as a prefect but also as a representative of the will or *mandatum* of the citizens of Rome. This implies that he has quite a bit of support from

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<sup>239</sup> Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford University Press, 2011): 185.

<sup>240</sup> Ambrosius, “Relatio Symmachii Urbis Praefecti,” *PLL*, 16, 1.11.

non-Christians of high rank in Roman society. The reason he is so insistent in this matter is because he believes the emperor has violated this *mandatum* of the people by not reinstalling the Altar:

For indeed to what is it more suitable that we defend the institutions of our ancestors and the laws and fate of our fatherland, rather than to the glory of these times which is still greater when you understand that you can permit nothing against the custom of our ancestors.

*Cui enim magis commodat quod instituta majorum, quod patriae jura et fata defendimus, quam temporum gloriae: quae tum major est, cum vobis contra morem parentum intelligentis nil licere?*<sup>241</sup>

By removing the Altar, the emperor has threatened the fabric of Roman civilization itself—*mos maiorum*. It is Symmachus' duty as both prefect and citizen to “defend,” *defendimus*, the very “fate,” or *fata* of Rome itself.

The loss of the Altar of Victory was an important outward sign of the dramatic change that took place in the city of Rome at this time. Although Symmachus saw it as the most important issue and the biggest threat to Rome's future, Ambrose seemed far more concerned with another facet of Symmachus' argument. In addition to discussing the Altar, Symmachus also mentioned the deplorable treatment of the Vestal Virgins after the loss of imperial support: “With how much advantage to your treasury are the prerogatives of the sacred Vestal Virgins diminished?” *Quanto commodo sacri aerarii vestri Vestalium virginum praerogativa detracta est?*<sup>242</sup> Symmachus goes on to state that without imperial support these poor virgins have no livelihood whatsoever: “Their sole office is in the stipend of their chastity,” *Honor solus est in illo velut stipendio castitatis.*<sup>243</sup> Yet the absence of imperial funding is only part of the problem. It seems that

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 1. 3.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 1.11.

<sup>243</sup> Ambrosius, “Relatio Symmachii Urbis Praefecti,” *PLL*, 16, 1.11.

these virgins and other sacred offices were cut off from family inheritances as well, making it even more difficult to sustain the ancient priesthods:

Freemen take legacies, slaves are not denied the proper privilege of making wills; only virgins and the ministers of sacred offices are excluded from seeking the rewards of heredity.

*Capiunt legata liberti, servis testamentorum, justa commoda non negantur; tantum virgines, et fatalium sacrorum ministri excluduntur praediis haereditate quaesitis.*<sup>244</sup>

In short, the timeless tradition of the Roman virgin priesthood was coming to an end simply because it had no way to sustain itself.

This issue is particularly important to Ambrose because he responds to it directly and vehemently in his own letter to Valentinian II. Ambrose does not share Symmachus' sentiment that the Vestal Virgins are a dying breed:

Hardly are seven Vestal Virgins received. Behold the whole number whom the file and chapel of the head, the purpled murex robes, the throng of their litter surrounded by a company of ministers, the greatest privileges, the immense prophets, and the prescribed time of chastity have gathered together.

*Vix septem Vestales capiuntur puellae. En totus numerus quem infulae vitatti capit, purpuratarum vestium murices, pompa lecticae ministrorum circumfusa comitatu, privilegia maxima, lucra ingentia, praescripta denique pudicitiae tempora coegerunt.*<sup>245</sup>

Ambrose considers this sacred office to be as popular and profitable as ever. The number of Vestals may always be seven, but that did not mean that their popularity did not inspire imitation. The Vestals were particularly distasteful to Ambrose, who saw their "prescribed chastity," *praescripta pudicitiae*, as a mockery to real virginity.

These letters were written no earlier than 385. Nearly a decade stands in between *De virginibus* and the above dispute. Yet context can still be gleaned from Ambrose's

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 1.13.

<sup>245</sup> Ambrosius, "Epistola XVIII," 11.

enigmatic response. How can the Vestals be on the brink of oblivion yet still as powerful and profitable as ever? Someone must be lying and history suggests that it is Ambrose who is embellishing here. There must have been real competition between Christian and non-Christian forms of virginal piety nonetheless. Ambrose contrasts the gaudy, hypocritical display of the Vestals with the ideal form of Christian virginity that he first outlined in *De virginibus*:

Chastity is increased by its own sacrifices. It is not Virginity which is bought at a price, and not possessed through eagerness for virtue; It is not integrity which is bid upon in an auction, and weighed out for a time. The first victory of chastity is to conquer the desires of one's own faculties.

*Suis castitas cumulatur dispendiis. Non est virginitas, quae pretio emitur, non virtutis studio possidetur: non est integritas quaecumque in auctione nummario ad tempus licitatur compendio. Prima castitatis victoria est facultatum cupiditates vincere.*<sup>246</sup>

The qualities listed here echo the ones seen in *De virginibus*. It was not appropriate for a virgin to demand payment for her services. Worldly matters were not important to the ascetic.

Ambrose struggled with this true definition of chastity throughout *De virginibus*. *Pudor* is an abstract quality which is obtained not only by being chaste but also by acting modestly. The Vestal Virgins were pagans who failed to live up to this ideal. The fact that the office only lasted for a fifty-year duration and that it led to immense popularity and imitation was proof that it was a flawed understanding of virginity. Ambrose sets out to define Christian virginity with this in mind. In order to convince young Roman women to embrace this strict lifestyle he needed a plethora of significant *exempla* at his disposal. Agnes, as a Roman herself was the most important *exemplum* at his disposal. Just like

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<sup>246</sup> Ambrosius, "Epistola XVIII," 12.

Damasus, Ambrose appropriates the martyr to bolster his own authority and sway the congregation of Christian Romans to favor his position.

#### **CHAPTER 4: AGNES BEATAE VIRGINIS: AMBROSE AND THE MILANESE CHURCH**

The life of Ambrose of Milan cannot be characterized by one masterwork or one revealing epistle. He was a complex theologian who lived in a complex world. The younger Ambrose who wrote *De virginibus* was far removed from the elder Ambrose who, at the height of his tenure as bishop, challenged the authority of emperors. Ambition was the one dominant, characteristic features of this man throughout his life. *De virginibus* was a work that demonstrated his authority to the western church. His letter to Valentinian II regarding the Altar of Victory was no less influential, making his presence known to Rome's foundering aristocracy. Ambrose exerted his authority with these early works, but he was not alone in doing so. Jerome, the prodigy of Pope Damasus, wrote treatises on virginity similar to Ambrose and promoted himself with no less authority. But in his early career, Ambrose had still done nothing to redefine Christian literature. A critical event in Milan in 385 provided him with the opportunity to do so.

In the wake of the defeat of Valens at Adrianople in 378 C.E., the new western emperor Valentinian II and his mother Justina were stationed in the city of Milan along with a contingent of Gothic troops under the behest of the eastern emperor, Theodosius. Ambrose's influence over the new emperor had already been demonstrated in the Altar of Victory affair, but this relationship with Valentinian was put to the test almost immediately. The empress Justina was an adherent of Arianism, and over time she convinced Valentinian to adopt this sect as well. In 385, Justina had her fourteen-year old son seize the Portian Basilica from the control of bishop Ambrose. Ambrose stood his ground and refused to comply. Justina countered this reaction by demanding control over



the new basilica inside the city walls, which served as Ambrose's Cathedral church.

Ambrose and a sizable crowd of supporters occupied the basilica and refused to leave.<sup>247</sup>

Valentinian established a guard around the church leading to a siege that lasted for several days. According to Homes Dudden, Ambrose developed a new type of church music that was literally revolutionary: "To relieve the tension and cheer the spirits of his supporters, Ambrose encouraged them to occupy themselves with constant singing."<sup>248</sup> This event supposedly spurred the production of the Ambrosian hymn. This type of hymn became such an immensely popular style of music that it has dominated western liturgical celebrations ever since. This event is well-attested by Augustine, who was a fellow occupant of the basilica at the time of the siege:

This [tradition] was established at this time so that hymns and songs could be sung in the manner of eastern churches, so that the people would not grow tired from the boredom of lamentation. Retained from that time until the present day, it has been imitated by many, by almost all your flocks and the rest of the world.

*Tunc hymni et psalmi ut canerentur secundum morem orientalium partium, ne populus maeroris taedio contabesceret, institutum est, ex illo in hodiernum retentum multis iam ac paene omnibus gregibus tuis et per cetera orbis imitantibus.*<sup>249</sup>

This affirmation by Augustine has served as both a blessing and a curse to scholarship on the Ambrosian hymns. Augustine credits the popularization of this tradition to Ambrose, but he also admits that these hymns were heavily imitated even at the time he wrote his *Confessions*—only a decade or two after the event itself. This has made modern scholars unnecessarily wary of attributing any particular Ambrosian hymn to Ambrose himself.

Homes Dudden, the traditional authority on the life of Ambrose, is reluctant to credit any of the hymns attributed to Ambrose as authentic other than the four mentioned

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<sup>247</sup> Homes Dudden, *The Life and Times of Saint Ambrose, Vol. I* (Oxford University Press, 1985): 270-85.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>249</sup> Augustinus, *Confessions*, IX.7.15.

in the writings of Augustine and Ambrose.<sup>250</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that modern biographers and historians of Ambrose ignore these valuable sources despite convincing evidence for their authenticity. After surveying the surviving Milanese hymnal manuscripts in 1862, Luigi Biraghi argued for the authenticity of eighteen of the forty hymns, well attested in the manuscript tradition. Although historians, like Dudden, have confined themselves to the four hymns that Augustine himself verifies, scholars specializing in hymnology favor Biraghi's extended list of authentic hymns with a few minor caveats. A.S. Walpole accepts fourteen of these eighteen hymns as authentic, but ignores four others on stylistic grounds.<sup>251</sup> Walpole adopts the methodology employed by Biraghi for determining the authenticity of a hymn: "Firstly a hymn must be in every respect worthy of Ambrose, in subject-matter literary style, and prosody."<sup>252</sup> Walpole refines this methodology by adding the following observation: "Like some other writers Ambrose was prone to repeating himself, often using the same words. A hymn therefore that contains characteristically Ambrosian thoughts and phrases is likely to have been written by Ambrose."<sup>253</sup> Although the Ambrosian hymns were repeatedly imitated throughout the Middle Ages, an examination of style, word choice, and especially content should reveal the real Ambrose.

This expanded view of the Ambrosian hymns helps explain the popularity of the new style that Ambrose introduced at such a crucial moment. Although Ambrose cites four hymns specifically praising God, the expanded list includes a number of hymns

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<sup>250</sup> Dudden, 293-4.

<sup>251</sup> A.S. Walpole, "Early Latin Hymns," (Cambridge, 1922): 20.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

dedicated to influential martyrs, including the popular Roman martyr Agnes.<sup>254</sup> The mass of ordinary people occupying the basilica with Ambrose during this crisis would need more from these hymns than just an appealing new style. The content itself must have engaged them emotionally. Singing about the bravery of local heroes who were famous for resisting persecution must have validated their own resistance. The Agnes hymn offers more than just an account of her torture and execution; it also puts her own words of defiance into the mouths of those who recited it.

The authenticity of the Agnes hymn, along with most of the other hymns considered authentic by Biraghi and Walpole, is often overlooked by modern biographers and historians of Ambrose's life.<sup>255</sup> Neil McLynn perhaps exemplifies the scholarly distaste for these sources best in his footnote on their authenticity: "Like so many of Ambrose's innovations, the practice was current in the east."<sup>256</sup> McLynn undermines Ambrose's achievement because he believes it lacks originality. Once again, Ambrose is only responsible for popularizing in the west what was already widely used in the east. This assumption is simply untrue. Although hymnology does not begin with Ambrose, he cultivated a western style that proved to be enormously appealing to not only his audience at the basilica but also the countless generations of western Christians who followed. This omission of the hymns as legitimate source material is an unfortunate

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<sup>254</sup> The four uncontested Ambrosian hymns are *Aeterne rerum conditor*; *Deus creator omnium*; *Iam surgit hora tertia*; *Veni redemptor gentium*.

<sup>255</sup> Homes Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, only accepts the four verifiable as usable sources; Neil McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (University of California Press, 1994): 201, confines himself to the hymns known to Augustine; Daniel H. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the end of the Nicene Arian Conflicts* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1995): 210-17, ignores the Hymns entirely, deriving all his evidence for the siege of the *Nova Basilica* from Ambrose's Letters; John Morehead, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Society in the Late Roman World* (Longman, 1999): 142. Unlike these others, Morehead recognizes fourteen hymns identified by Walpole as authentic, but fails to use any of these hymns as direct source material.

<sup>256</sup> Neil McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 201; f144.

oversight because an analysis of them can help reveal the specific conditions of Ambrose's confrontation with Empress Justina. A study of the uniquely Ambrosian qualities introduced to Latin prosody at this point in time will also help demonstrate how Ambrose contributed to Damasus' effort to "Romanize" western Christianity.

#### THE DISPUTE WITH JUSTINA OVER THE PORTIAN BASILICA

Only Ambrose, his biographer Paulinus of Milan, and Augustine document the dispute over the Portian basilica. Paulinus and Augustine mention the event only in passing and fail to offer anything new to the account of Ambrose. Although many details can be extracted from the three lengthy letters that survive, it must be emphasized that the historical record of this struggle is decidedly one-sided. The reader must be careful to avoid accepting Ambrose's writing without scrutiny. Each of these documents represents an established genre: Epistle 20 is a personal letter to Marcellina. Epistle 21 consists of a formal reply to an imperial mandate along with the *Sermo contra Auxentius*, a public speech tailored to win support for a cause.<sup>257</sup> McLynn correctly asserts that Ambrose used these genres to garner support for Nicene Christianity, not to adequately document the specifics of this dispute: "Each illuminates one aspect of the conflict with the concentrated glare of a searchlight beam, but they are played deliberately on an enemy's weaknesses and allow no overall view of the battlefield."<sup>258</sup> This makes outlining the exact chronology of the events extremely difficult, but also open to debate.

Justina, like many of history's most infamous female rulers, is a figure obscured by a historical record written entirely by her enemies. Homes Dudden states that there

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<sup>257</sup> McLynn, 185; The epistles are listed according to their numerical organization of the Maurist collection, adopted by J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Lingua Latina*. The *Sermo contra Auxentius* is included in Epistle 21 according to this system of organization.

<sup>258</sup> McLynn, 185.

are only two things about Justina that can be known with any certainty: “She was an Arian in faith and she detested Ambrose.”<sup>259</sup> Even the circumstances surrounding Justina’s adoption of Arianism over Nicene Christianity are unclear. Her deceased husband Valentinian I had come to power under the auspices of Constantius I, who had himself been an adherent of Arian Christianity. McLynn characterizes Valentinian I as a practical politician, who—although outwardly Christian—had little patience for priests and bishops that interfered with his governance: “No regime in the Christian empire was less priest-ridden than that of Valentinian I.”<sup>260</sup> In 385 C.E. when this particular dispute surfaced, Justina was serving as regent for a fourteen-year old boy. The usurper Maximus, who had ousted Gratian from power in 383 C.E., was still a considerable threat to this young emperor. Justina may have adopted and promoted Arian Christianity in Milan in an attempt to garner support from the increasing Gothic presence in the region. The fact that Justina chose Auxentius of Durostorum to be her theological champion opposite Ambrose suggests that she needed to appeal to a Gothic audience. This Auxentius, not to be confused with the former bishop of Milan, was the adopted son of Ulfila, the Arian missionary to the Goths.<sup>261</sup>

According to Ambrose’s *Letter to Marcellina*, the dispute started in 385 C.E. when Justina attempted to gain control of a church referred to as the “Portian Basilica,” *Portiana* by Ambrose. This basilica was located “outside the city walls,” *extramurana*.<sup>262</sup> No references to a “Portian” basilica outside the city walls exist outside of Ambrose’s own letters. McLynn identifies the Portian basilica with the late antique church of San

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<sup>259</sup> Dudden, 270.

<sup>260</sup> McLynn, 80.

<sup>261</sup> Dudden, 270.

<sup>262</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistola,” 20.1, *PLL* 16, 994.

Lorenzo in Milan. He notes that this church's proximity to the imperial palace complex, along with the *spolia* used in its construction from the surrounding amphitheater demonstrate a close link with imperial patronage.<sup>263</sup> It therefore seems unlikely that Ambrose had any sort of claim to the building itself. It was a church, but it was located outside of the city of Milan and clearly served as a private chapel and mausoleum for the imperial family.<sup>264</sup> McLynn suggests that if this identification is correct, Ambrose had no authority to interfere with Justina's actions in this matter: "It is possible, therefore, that the court's planned 'seizure' of a 'basilica of the church' was nothing more than the intention to use a church that they already considered their own."<sup>265</sup>

By resisting this claim on the Portian Basilica, Ambrose was forcing the young ruler to bend to his own leadership in matters of church governance. When this dispute resurfaced later over control of the Nova basilica, Ambrose addressed this issue over whether the emperor could be allowed to control his own personal church:

Again the emperor is said to have handed down, "Should I not have one basilica?" I have responded "It is not proper for you to have her." What is there for you [to have] an adulteress, who is not a legitimate bride bound to Christ?

*Iterum dicitur mandasse imperatorem Debeo et ego unam basilicam habere. Respondi: Non tibi licet illam habere. Quid tibi cum adultera? Adultera est enim, quae non est legitimo Christi conjugio copulata.*<sup>266</sup>

Ambrose is forcing the emperor to accept the fact that his temporal authority has limitations. Even if he takes the building by force, he must accept that he will not obtain a willing "bride" in perfect "union with Christ," but a sullied "adulteress" who now serves two masters. The statement plays on the notion of the church as the bride of Christ, based

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<sup>263</sup> McLynn, 177-8.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 177-8.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>266</sup> Ambrosius, "Epistolae," 20.19.

on Ambrose's interpretation of the *Song of Songs*. This statement establishes the fact that in order for the church to remain legitimate in the eyes of God, it must remain independent from imperial control.

Ambrose was then asked to make an appearance at the imperial court to defend his position on this matter. Duddens claims that this summons to the imperial court was an attempt to frighten the bishop into bending to its will: "Ambrose was summoned to the imperial palace, where—no doubt with the object of overawing him—the illustrious members of the Emperor's Privy Council were already assembled."<sup>267</sup> McLynn reflects on this summons as an attempt at political posturing: "The summons to the consistory shows them attempting instead to avert any possible conflict by making clear their intentions and meeting whatever objections the bishop might advance."<sup>268</sup> This dispute was over more than a church; it dealt with the religious sensibilities of the young emperor himself. Ambrose did not want to let the empress regent convert the personal chapel of the western emperor into an Arian church. Doing so would be a public statement of the emperor's own support for Arianism.

Regardless of the intention behind the imperial summons, Ambrose indicated that Milan's citizens saw it as the beginning of a persecution against their Nicene bishop: "Do they [the consistory] not remember that when the people learned that I was sought by the palace, they marched out in such away that they were not able to withstand the force of those people." *Nonne meminerunt quod ubi me cognovit populus palatium petisse, ita irruit, ut vim eius ferre non possent.*<sup>269</sup> This event demonstrated that the popular support for Nicene Christianity in the city of Milan itself greatly outweighed Justina's own

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<sup>267</sup> Dudden, 272.

<sup>268</sup> McLynn, 179.

<sup>269</sup> Ambrosius, "Epistolae," 21.29.

religious support. The palace knew that the matter had to be handled carefully. After Ambrose refused to back down from the issue, the emperor seemingly let the matter rest without converting the Portian basilica to Arian services. McLynn believes that the popular uprising was not a coincidence: “It nevertheless seems likely that the bishop had himself had a hand in the organizing of these reinforcements for his case, which clearly took the court by surprise and upset their delicate plans.”<sup>270</sup> Ambrose no doubt knew that this incident had greater implications for his bishopric than the loss of just one church. It was an event that required immediate action and large-scale support.

After this event, Valentinian released his hold on the Portian basilica, and for a few short weeks the matter appeared to be resolved. Justina had in fact waited for the crowd to cool down before making another move at obtaining a church for Arian services. But this time it was not the Portian Basilica under threat, but the “new,” *nova* basilica, “inside the city walls,” *intramurana*.<sup>271</sup> One week before Easter in 386 C.E., the church was surrounded by troops, many of them Gothic allies, *Gothi tribuni*, who had just obtained citizenship.<sup>272</sup> Ambrose confronted these men directly: “For this reason did you seize Roman property, so that you might show yourselves to be ministers of public unrest? Where will you go to, if this place should be destroyed,” *Propterea vos possessio Romana suscepit, ut perturbationis publicae vos praebeat is ministros? Quo transibitis, si haec deleta fuerint?*<sup>273</sup> Although Ambrose aggressively denied any accusation that he

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<sup>270</sup> McLynn, 180.

<sup>271</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” 20.1.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.9.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.9.



was stirring the city's population against the emperor, this statement made it hard for him to deny that he was himself a minister of "public unrest," *perturbationis publicae*.<sup>274</sup>

His own supporters were whipped into such a frenzy that he was ordered to calm them, but he claimed that he had no ability to do so: "I responded that it was in my power not to excite them, it is in God's hand to soothe them," *Referebam in meo jure esse, ut non excitarem: in Dei manu, uti mitigaret*.<sup>275</sup> Ambrose was nevertheless proud of the pressure he put on the Arian minority in the city: "None of the Arians dared to go out because there was no one from the city, few from the royal household and also some Goths." *Prodire de Arianis nullus audebat; quia nec quisquam de civibus erat, pauci de familia regia, nonnulli etiam Gothi*.<sup>276</sup> Ambrose knew that he had to exploit the overwhelmingly Nicene population if he was going to have any success resisting the will of an emperor residing in his own capital.

It was once again popular support that saved the beleaguered bishop. A few days after troops had occupied the Nova basilica, a great crowd of people gathered at the old basilica within the city walls and asked for a *lector*.<sup>277</sup> While performing services at this older church, Ambrose learned that another crowd had formed at the Nova basilica, requesting his presence. When Ambrose returned to his church, he found that he now had the support of many of the local troops as well: "Nevertheless, the soldiers said that they had come to pray, not to fight," *Ipsi tamen milites se ad orationem venisse, non ad proelium loquebantur*.<sup>278</sup> At the same time Ambrose surprisingly found himself in control of his own personal contingent of troops, he received word that a group of miscreants had

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<sup>274</sup> Ambrosius, "Epistolae," 20.9.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.9.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.12.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.12.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.13.

disturbed the imperial “flags,” *vela*, hung on the outside of the Portian basilica.<sup>279</sup> Incensed by what seemed like a revolution brewing in his midst, the emperor sent additional troops to surround the nova basilica. A secretary sent directly from the emperor approached Ambrose: “He said, why have you sent priests to the basilica? If you are a tyrant, I wish to know, so that I may know in what manner I might prepare against you,” *Ait: Cur presbyteros ad basilicam destinasti? Si tyrannus es, scire volo; ut sciam quemadmodum me adversum te praeparem.*<sup>280</sup>

Ambrose responded by portraying himself as the persecuted victim: After refusing to surrender the Nova basilica to the emperor, Ambrose read to the crowd from the book of Jonah. When confronted by a *notarius* sent by the imperial court, Ambrose defended himself against an accusation of sedition: “If it seems tyrannical that I have arms, although [they are] in the name of Christ, I have ability to offer my body. Why did he delay to strike if he judged me a tyrant,” *Si haec tyrannidis videntur, habeo arma, sed in Christi nomine : habeo offerendi mei corporis potestatem. Quid moraretur ferire, si tyrannum putaret?*<sup>281</sup> Ambrose placed the control of the situation in the emperor’s hands but also made it known that he was willing to die in defense of the church. In Ambrose’s mind the emperor was seeking a degree of authority unworthy of his office. It was only natural for a bishop to die willingly in defense of the autonomy of the church.

The siege on the Nova basilica lasted for roughly two days. Ambrose used the opportunity to motivate the crowd in variety of ways. In addition to reading from the books of *Jonah* and *Job*, Ambrose had the crowd sing the psalms aloud together: “I was not able to return home because the crowded soldiers, who were guarding the basilica,

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<sup>279</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” 20.13.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 20.22.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 20.23.

wandered around. We meanwhile recited with our brothers the psalms in the small church,” *Ego domum redire non potui; quia circumfusi errant milites, qui basilicam custodiebant. Cum fratribus psalmos in ecclesiae basilica minore diximus.*<sup>282</sup> It is unclear if any of these recitations included hymns produced by Ambrose. A careful examination of specific hymns later in this chapter will attempt to address this question. What is clear is that Ambrose was inspired by the power of the choral singing of the biblical psalms at this particular point in time. This first siege and the exact circumstances surrounding it gave Ambrose the inspiration to produce his own hymns. According to McLynn, Ambrose had realized the power of group recitation during this struggle: “His division of the congregation into antiphonal choirs for singing psalms, during the night of Wednesday of Holy Week, had already created a sense of increased participation in the liturgy.”<sup>283</sup> Morehead describes Ambrose’s passion for the Psalms:

Within the Bible the book of Psalms is especially sweet, and after running through various songs in the Bible, from which he typically omits those in the New Testament, he [Ambrose] observes that in a psalm teaching and beauty contend with each other: it is sung for delight and learned for instruction, its sweetness penetrates deep down.<sup>284</sup>

In a moment of persecution, Ambrose channeled ancient Hebrew songs of persecution and redemption throughout a community bound by the threat of tyranny: Ambrose now had the blueprint for his future compositions.

Valentinian I issued an order for his soldiers to retire the next morning. According to Dudden, the emperor himself decided to move away from the capital over the summer of 386 C.E.: “He seems to have desired to get away from Ambrose and the Catholic crowd of Milan, the sight of whom reminded him too painfully of his recent

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<sup>282</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” 20.24.

<sup>283</sup> McLynn, 200.

<sup>284</sup> Morehead, 141.

humiliation.”<sup>285</sup> Although tensions had eased, Justina began to foment future trouble for Ambrose. Ambrose was already aware of Justina’s role in the initial plan to take the Portian basilica. In a letter to his sister Marcellina, he compares himself to other famous men persecuted by notorious women: “Should I say that even Elijah was persecuted by bloody Jezebel; that Herodias had John the Baptist killed,” *Quid dicam quod etiam Eliam Jezebel cruenta persecute est? Quod Joannem Baptistam Herodias fecit occidi?*<sup>286</sup>

Ambrose was beginning to relate his struggles with the emperor and his mother with the trials of a martyr. In a confrontation with Calligonus, a figure from Theodosius’ eastern court, Ambrose offers his life up to prove his innocence in the dispute: “Against me, may they turn all their spears; may my blood satisfy their thirst,” *In me omnia sua tela convertant, meo sanguine sitim suam expleant!*<sup>287</sup>

During her absence from Milan, Justina appears to have come into contact with Auxentius, the bishop of Durostorum. According to Dudden, the two of them were instrumental in producing a new law to ensure religious tolerance for Arian Christians: “Justina and Auxentius collaborated on a plot. An imperial law was drafted, the provisions of which were as follows. Liberty of assembling for public worship was granted to all who accepted the decisions of the council of Rimini.”<sup>288</sup> At Rimini, or Ariminum, in 358 C.E., Constantius II had eastern bishops establish a scriptural precedent for an Arian interpretation of the nature of Christ. Although the new law did not interfere with Nicene Christianity, it did provide the legal grounds necessary for an Arian takeover of the Portian Basilica. This legislation itself was innocuous, but it

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<sup>285</sup> Dudden, 280.

<sup>286</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” 20.18.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 20.28.

<sup>288</sup> Dudden, 281.

appears to have been a part of a calculated attempt to draw Ambrose out and prosecute him for sedition on legal grounds. When the imperial court returned to Milan, Ambrose was summoned to engage in a theological debate “concerning faith,” *de fide* with Auxentius.<sup>289</sup>

In Epistle 21, Ambrose composes a formal defense, directed to Valentinian himself. He does so to emphasize his distaste for the new law: “How can we settle this, when you yourself have already decided. And yet, you have even given laws, for which there is no freedom to judge otherwise,” *Ubi illud constituimus, Imperator, quod iam ipse tuum iudicium declarasti? immo etiam dedisti leges, nec cui esset liberum aliud iudicare.*<sup>290</sup> He also wants to emphasize that he does not recognize a tribunal he considers unfit to judge a bishop: “Finally must I myself nominate laymen for judges, those who, when they remain true to their faith, must be proscribed or executed themselves, because the law passed concerning the [empire] wide faith determines,” *Deinde ipse committam, ut eligam iudices laicos, qui cum tenuerint fide veritatem, aut prescribantur, aut necentur, quod lex de fide lata decernit?*<sup>291</sup> It is tempting to imagine Ambrose defiantly confronting Valentinian with these words in the consistory, but Ambrose was wise enough not to confront such a significant enemy on his own terms. Ambrose instead retreated to his own church and gathered his supporters to once again weather the storm.<sup>292</sup>

Ambrose used this imperial summons as an opportunity to once again pander to his crowd. In the *Sermo Contra Auxentius*, Ambrose directly attacks Auxentius. Ambrose

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<sup>289</sup> McLynn, 198; Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” 21.26.

<sup>290</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” 21.9.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 21.12.

<sup>292</sup> McLynn, 199-200.

writes his *Sermo* for an audience when addressing his concerns about this Arian bishop. The *Sermo* serves as a propagandistic showpiece more than an actual response to Auxentius on matters concerning the faith. McLynn goes so far as to compare it to Cicero's Catilinarian orations.<sup>293</sup> He refers to Auxentius in third person instead of addressing him in the second person, dedicating more attention to slandering Auxentius' personal character than arguing against Arianism. Ambrose calls Auxentius' honesty into question by drawing attention to his pre-Christian name:

While Auxentius is offered, Mercurinus is excluded. There is one portent, but two names. Indeed because it was unknown who he was, he changed his name, because there was an Arian bishop Auxentius, in order to deceive the people, he called himself Auxentius [after] that man who held the name.

*Ergo Auxentius eiicitur, Mercurinus excluditur est, duo nomina. Etenim necognosceretur quis esset, mutavit sibi vocabulum; ut quia hic fuerat Auxentius episcopus Arianus, ad decipiendum plebem, quam ille tenuerat, se vocaret Auxentium.*<sup>294</sup>

This information would hardly seem pertinent in the consistory, where Auxentius' supporters were well aware of his background. This attack is aimed to remind Ambrose's congregation that this imposter has no real connection with the former bishop Auxentius who held the office before the election of Ambrose.

Ambrose does not confine his attack to Auxentius; he also rebukes the misguided excesses of the Arian heresy. In a fit of anti-Semitism no doubt calculated to rile the mob, he compares the crimes of this heresy to the crimes of the Jews against Christ:

"Nevertheless, you see how the Arians are worse than the Jews. The latter asked whether He [Christ] believed the right of tribute should be given to Caesar; The former want to give the right of the Church to the Emperor," *Et tamen videte quanto peiores Ariani sunt,*

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<sup>293</sup> McLynn, 185.

<sup>294</sup> Ambrosius, "Epistolae," 22.22.

*quam Judaei. Illi quaerebat utrum solvendum putaret Caesari ius tributi; Isti, Imperatori volunt dare ius Ecclessiae.*<sup>295</sup> Ambrose is less interested in actively debating Arian theology and more interested in angering the vast Nicene population of Milan. The obsession with appropriating the physical church is equated with a greed for land and wealth. Ambrose distinguishes himself as a defender of the poor in the face of an avaricious opponent: “They seek gold. I am able to say that I seek neither gold or silver,” *Aurum quaerunt, possum dicere: Argentum et aurum non quaero.*<sup>296</sup> This is a masterful performance in which Ambrose has now divided Milan along class lines. The Arians were the Imperial and military elite, who now wanted to savagely devour the poor Nicene church.

Ambrose works to distinguish his own character in the *Sermo* as well, portraying himself as a victim struggling for the true church: “Certainly if the Lord has appointed us to this struggle, it is in vain that you have kept so many watches and vigils through the days and nights; The will of Christ will be fulfilled,” *Certe si Dominus huic nos certamini deputavit, frustra pervigiles tot noctibus et diebus custodias exhibuistis et excubias: implebitur Christi voluntas.*<sup>297</sup> In order to amplify the feeling of persecution, Ambrose then draws the attention of his audience to martyrdom. He denies any attempt to hide from authority by showing that he has gone out publicly on a daily basis: “Did I myself not go out everyday for making visits or going out to the [shrines of] the martyrs,” *Ergo ipse non quotidie vel visitandi gratia prodibam, vel pergebam ad martyres?*<sup>298</sup> By visiting the martyrs, Ambrose demonstrates his willingness to obtain martyrdom for his

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<sup>295</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” 21.31.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.33.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.7.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.15.

cause himself: “I expected, I confess, something great, either sword or fire for the name of Christ,” *Exspectabam, fateor, magnum aliquid, aut gladium pro Christi nomine, aut incendum.*<sup>299</sup> At the end of the *Sermo*, Ambrose extends this zeal for martyrdom to his entire congregation:

But some threaten flames, sword and deportation. We, the servants of Christ, have learned not to be afraid. Thus it is written: “The arrows of infants become their wounds.

*Sed incendia aliqui, gladium, depotationem minantur. Didicimus Christi servuli non timere. Non timentibus numquam est gravis terror. Denique scriptum est: Sagittae infantium factae sunt plagae eorum.*<sup>300</sup>

Ambrose fittingly concludes his speech with a quotation from Psalm 63. He encourages his congregation to resist peacefully as true “servants of Christ,” in order to turn the weapons of their enemies against them.

This atmosphere of persecution was carefully cultivated to win the audience’s favor. Ambrose recognized his success from the last church siege and attempts to build on it. McLynn describes how Ambrose had effectively manipulated the competition: “The contest with Auxentius had been transformed into something very different from what Valentinian had envisioned: the confrontation between martyr and persecutor.”<sup>301</sup> The key instrument in this second basilica siege however was not a well-crafted speech but the use of choral, antiphonal singing. The opponents of Ambrose apparently knew of the success of his hymns and their ability to “deceive” the common Christian:

They say that my hymns have deceived the people. I do not deny this. Nothing is more powerful than such a grand song. What indeed is more powerful than the confession of the Trinity, which daily is celebrated from the mouths of so many people? Certainly all are eager to confess their faith, they know how to proclaim

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<sup>299</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” 21.15.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 21.36.

<sup>301</sup> McLynn, 204.



the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in verse. They [hymns] make everyone masters, who were scarcely able to be disciples.

*Hymnorum quoque meorum carminibus deceptum populum ferunt. Plane nec hoc abnuo. Grande Carmen istud est, quo nihil potentius. Quid enim potentius quam confessio Trinitatis, quae quotidie totius populi ore celebratur? Certatim omnes student fidem fateri, Patrem et Filium et Spiritum sanctum norunt versibus praedicare. Facti sunt igitur omnes magistri, qui vix poterant esse discipuli.*<sup>302</sup>

Ambrose crafted these hymns just as he had crafted this atmosphere of persecution.

Morehead describes the terrifying effect of this unifying song: “Those worshipping with Ambrose would display a unity which his enemies had best beware.”<sup>303</sup> Ambrose describes it as a success for Nicene faith, but the success of his hymns demonstrated an imitation of Christ’s passion on par with the act of martyrdom itself.

## FROM PSALMS TO HYMNS

The history of Latin hymnody does not begin with Ambrose. Jerome credits Hilary of Poitiers with the production of the first Latin “book of hymns,” *liber hymnorum*.<sup>304</sup> Isidore of Seville confirms that Hilary was the first to engage in Latin hymn writing.<sup>305</sup> Although Hilary was the first, he was far from the most popular. Only three hymns survive, and even these three are of dubious authorship.<sup>306</sup> Both of these authors were heavily influenced by a classical Roman education and both attempted to emulate classical meter in their poetry. But Hilary concerned himself too much with classical metrical value at a time when accentual rhythm was growing in popularity.<sup>307</sup>

Palmer considers his style to be too complicated for church recitation: “The style and

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<sup>302</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” 21.34.

<sup>303</sup> Morehead, 143.

<sup>304</sup> Hieronymus, “De viris illustribus,” III.100, *PLL* 23.

<sup>305</sup> Isidorus Hispaliensis, “De ecclesiasticis officiis,” I.6, *PLL* 83.

<sup>306</sup> Palmer, 59-60; Walpole, 1.

<sup>307</sup> Norberg, Dag, *An introduction to the study of medieval Latin versification*, trans. by Grant C. Roti and Jacqueline de La Chapelle Skubly (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004): 63; Palmer, 60.

contents of Hilary's hymns were also perhaps too far above the heads of the average congregation. His mixture of classical and Christian was sometimes crude."<sup>308</sup> Ambrose adopted Hilary's zeal for classicizing Christianity, but discovered a novel way to appeal to his audience.

Whereas Hilary adopted a distinctive, classical meter for each individual hymn, Ambrose embraces a simple pattern for every hymn that he produced. An Ambrosian hymn consists of exactly thirty-two lines of *iambic dimeter acatalectic*. According to Palmer, this "inspired" choice of meter allowed Ambrose to merge his own classical tastes with the new popular form: "Ambrose is far from neglecting classical prosody with this metre, but the ictus and accent on words in the line often coincide, resulting in a compromise between classical tradition and the contemporary tendency towards accentual rhythms."<sup>309</sup> Although more complex forms of classical meter, such as the dactylic hexameter of Virgil, usually drew the reader's attention to the first syllable because of an unnatural divergence of ictus from accent, iambic dimeter provided a synchronized form of poetry easier to recite aloud in an antiphonal choir.<sup>310</sup> Ambrose provided a hymn, which was inspired by the classical lyrics of Horace and Virgil, but also easily understood by the Latin speakers of his day. This innovation explains why Ambrose's hymns have endured for nearly two millennia, and why they have produced a countless number of imitations.

A careful examination of *Aeterne rerum conditor*, the first of the four indisputable Ambrosian hymns, will help demonstrate Ambrose's brilliance in fusing classical and biblical themes. The hymn begins with an invocation to the "Eternal creator of all

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<sup>308</sup> Palmer, 61.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

things,” *aeterne rerum conditor*, who is responsible for governing the cosmos, “day and night,” *noctem diemque qui regis*.<sup>311</sup> The progression of time is an important element in these hymns, indicating that they were intended for recitation at specific points in the day. In this case, Ambrose focuses on Dawn by using a metaphor common to both classical and biblical poetry, the crowing of the cock. Jacques Fontaine describes the universal significance of this metaphor: “Virgile et la Bible donnent sa grandeur propre au thème du coq veilleur nocturne.”<sup>312</sup> Fontaine considers the crowing of the cock to specifically reference the trip Aeneas takes to the underworld:

Ambroise adapte en effet au dimètre le souvenir de la fin d’hexamètre “noctemque profundam”, par laquelle Virgile avait à deux reprises désigné la nuit sans fond du monde infernal: dans les imprecations de Didon contre elle-même (Aen. 4,26) et lors de la descente d’Enée aux enfers (Aen. 6,462).

This is the first of several Virgilian *souvenirs* that Fontaine identifies in the Ambrosian hymns. Ambrose wanted to evoke a classical mindset in his Christian audience. The purpose for doing so becomes clear after further examination of the hymn’s contents.

In the second stanza of the hymn, Ambrose introduces the “singing herald of the day,” *Praeco diei iam sonat*.<sup>313</sup> In order to provide a tight chronological ordering in these hymns, Ambrose uses *iam* to indicate that when the *praeco* or “herald” sings, it ushers in the dawn, “the rouser of boundless night,” *noctis profundae pervigil*.<sup>314</sup> The reference to Virgil’s *profundam noctem* mentioned above, evokes a common Virgilian term, *profundam*, often used to describe not only the “boundless” night, but also the “vast” Mediterranean. The next element of Dawn, introduced in the third stanza, enhances this

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<sup>311</sup> Ambrose De Milan, “Aeterne rerum conditor” in *Hymnes: Texte établi, traduit et annoté sous la direction de Jacques Fontaine, membre de Institut*, ed. Jacques Fontaine (Cerf: Paris, 2008): 1-2.

<sup>312</sup> Ambrose, *Hymnes*, ed. Jacques Fontaine, 155.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.5.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.6.

connection: “Awakened by this [herald], the morning star dissolves the fog from the sky,” *Hoc excitatus lucifer / solvit polum caligine*.<sup>315</sup> The modern reader must set aside the anachronistic connection between Lucifer and Satan and consider the classical reference to Venus. Venus is a pivotal guiding force in the *Aeneid* just as the demythologized Lucifer is a pivotal guiding force in this hymn.

Ambrose uses these specific Virgilian references to remind his audience of Aeneas’ most memorable struggles. He pulls his congregation directly into the epic saga by referring to a “wandering chorus,” *erronum chorus* in the third stanza. This use of chorus can be taken as a generic band of travellers, but it is also a rather blatant reference to his audience, which has patiently weathered the night with him during the siege of the basilica.<sup>316</sup> It is the break of Dawn, ushered in by the morning star, which allows this errant chorus to “depart from harmful paths,” *vias nocendi deserit*.<sup>317</sup> The harmful paths could signify the external opposition, which directly affected them or their internal struggle to remain stalwart in the face of opposition. In either case, Ambrose cleverly bolsters the determination of his congregation by comparing them to the epic hero struggling on the vast, tumultuous sea. In the next stanza, he specifically uses the imagery of the sailor foundering at sea, who is no longer lost thanks to the Dawn’s guiding light: “From this [Dawn] the sailor gathers his strength and the foam of the sea becomes docile,” *Hoc nauta vires colligit / pontique mitescunt freta*.<sup>318</sup> The Dawn, ushered in by Lucifer, is analogous to the demythologized Venus, who intercedes on Aeneas’ behalf at the beginning of Virgil’s epic poem. While reciting the hymn, the

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<sup>315</sup> Ambrose, “Aeterne rerum conditor,” 1.9-10.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.11.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.12.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.13-14.

audience becomes linked to popular classical storytelling, allowing them to embrace their own epic struggle throughout their long vigils.

The classical reference quickly morphs into a biblical one in the next line of the fifth stanza: “Because of this singing [cock] the rock of the church himself dissolves his fault,” *Hoc ipsa petra ecclesiae / canente culpam diluit*.<sup>319</sup> The hymn now references Peter’s denial of Christ in Matthew.<sup>320</sup> The Rock of the Church is an obvious reference to Peter, but also the bishop of Rome and the organized church. As the foundation of the church, Peter embodies it and all of its decisions concerning faith. The *culpa* of Peter in this line of the hymn refers to the growing divide between orthodox Trinitarians and heterodox Arians. The crowing cock exists to alert those sinners who have strayed from the orthodox faith: “The cock stirs those sleeping and rebukes the drowsy, the cock denounces those denying [God],” *Gallus iacentes excitat / et somnolentos increpat / Gallus negantes arguit*.<sup>321</sup> By heralding dawn, the cock becomes a defender of true—in this case Trinitarian—faith. The common element to both classical and biblical references is Dawn. It is a manifestation of the *aeterne conditor*’s guiding influence in this matter. Its piercing light will help errant sailors find their way and dissolve the faulty faith of Peter himself.

The next Ambrosian hymn, mentioned by Augustine, is “Now the third hour rises,” *Iam surgit hora tertia*.<sup>322</sup> *Hora tertia*, or “third hour” roughly corresponds to nine in the morning, indicating that time has progressed to the high point of the day. Once again, the word *iam* is significant. Fontaine notes the common usage of *iam* at the

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<sup>319</sup> Ambrose, “Aeterne rerum conditor,” 1.15-16.

<sup>320</sup> Mathew, 26:69-75.

<sup>321</sup> Ambrose, “Aeterne rerum conditor,” 1.18-20.

<sup>322</sup> Ambrose, “Iam surgit hora tertia,” 3.1.

beginning of lines in the poetry of Virgil: “On rencontre dans l’Énéide plusieurs emplois de iam en tête du vers, souvent avec antéposition du verbe...”<sup>323</sup> This usage is another common Virgilian *souvenir* found throughout the hymns. *Iam* serves the additional purpose of connecting the *tertia hora*, occurring during the siege at the basilica, with the *tertia hora* of Jesus’ crucifixion, described in the next line: “When Christ ascended the cross,” *qua Christus ascendit crucem*.<sup>324</sup> This is an interesting conflation of events. Ambrose once again draws his congregation into the hymn by relating their own trials to the ultimate trial of Christ. He achieves this by using familiar Virgilian poetic constructions, allowing the audience to feel like it is participating in events of epic proportion.

The hymn then turns to a discussion of how Christ handled his own impending death: “He thought nothing insolent in mind, but turned his attention to prayer,” *nil insolens mens cogitet, / intendat affectum precis*.<sup>325</sup> Ambrose reassures his audience that those who “keep Christ in heart,” *corde Christum suscipit*, will maintain “a sense of innocence,” *innoxium sensum gerit*.<sup>326</sup> With this statement, Ambrose reminds those who are struggling with him to act as any true martyr would—as an imitator of Christ. Yet Christ is not the focus of this hymn. The Virgin Mary is the figure who is celebrated in this victory as Christ acknowledges her role in bringing about such a pivotal moment: “At the highest point of his triumph, he said to his mother, ‘Behold your son mother;’” *Celsus triumphi vertice / matri loquebatur suae: / <<en filius, mater, tuus; / apostole, en mater*

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<sup>323</sup> Ambrose, *Hymnes*, ed. Jacques Fontaine, 214.

<sup>324</sup> Ambrose, “*Iam surgit hora tertia*,” 3.2.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.3-4.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.5-6.

*tua* >><sup>327</sup> This declaration is a reference to the speech given in John 19:26-7, but with a few key differences. Fontaine considers the substitution of *Ecce* in John with *en* to be another Virgilian *souvenir*.<sup>328</sup> *En* is often used to introduce characters of importance in the *Aeneid*. Ambrose uses it to emphasize the epic nature of the divine birth.

The repetition of *mater*, used three times in the hymn, also emphasizes the maternity of Mary—an important aspect of the Arian debate.<sup>329</sup> Mary’s parentage is described as the highest mystery, “*alto...mysterio*,” another reference to Trinitarian belief, which acknowledges the mystery of Christ’s dual nature.<sup>330</sup> Proper faith is stressed at the end of the hymn to remind the listeners of what they are struggling for: “We believe in a God who was born / an infant of a sacred virgin / who destroyed the sins of the world / sitting at the right hand of the father,” *Nos credimus natum Deum / partumque virginis sacrae, / peccata qui mundi tulit / ad dexteram sedans Patris*.<sup>331</sup> This simple reiteration of the trinity at the end of the hymn is a powerful reminder of the purpose of Ambrose’s protest. The use of *sedans* emphasizes that these events have led to the rise of the new age Ambrose mentions earlier in the hymn. Christ’s death brought about the “destruction of the realm of death,” *mortisque regnum diruit*.<sup>332</sup> This is another Virgilian *souvenir*, cleverly used to emphasize that the pagan world glorified in the epic has come to an end.<sup>333</sup>

Ambrose completes the cycle of the day with, “God, Creator of all things,” *Deus creator omnium*. This hymn, like the ones examined above, is designed to garner support

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<sup>327</sup> Ambrose, “*Iam surgit hora tertia*,” 3.19-20.

<sup>328</sup> Ambrose, *Hymnes*, ed. Jacques Fontaine, 223.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>330</sup> Ambrose, “*Iam surgit hora tertia*,” 3.22.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.29-32.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.11.

<sup>333</sup> Ambrose, *Hymnes*, ed. Jacques Fontaine, 219.

from the besieged congregation. The hymn serves as an evening prayer to glorify God during a pivotal moment in his creation—the separation of light from darkness. The imagery does not embrace the darkness of night or *nox*. It instead elaborates on the power of the creation of day or *dies* in an attempt to energize the now “weary minds,” *mentesque fessas*, of the protestors.<sup>334</sup> He begins to hint at this dualistic struggle between night and day in the first stanza: “Guider of the heavens, who dresses the day with decorative light and the night with the blessing of sleep,” *polique rector, vestiens / diem decoro lumine, / noctem soporis gratia*.<sup>335</sup> Day precedes night in its importance as well as in its décor. The *gratia* given to the night is in a sense a reward for a day well lived. The grace of thankfulness for sleep could acknowledge the congregation’s need to be thankful for another successful day of protest.

The weariness of the congregation becomes clearer in the second and third stanzas of the hymn. Their “weary minds,” *mentesque fessas* must be “alleviated,” *allevet*, from their labors, *usui laboris* as well as their “anxious lamentations,” *anxios luctusque*.<sup>336</sup> These anxious lamentations are—in all likelihood—a reference to their struggle with the emperor and his mother over the faith: “Now we render thanks for the day ended and prayers for the night begun, so that you may judge our accused sacrifices, we [who are] singing hymns,” *Grates peracto iam die /Et noctis exortu preces, / voti reos ut adiuves, / hymnum canentes soluimus*.<sup>337</sup> The organization of this stanza is interesting. The subject and verb are withheld until the last line, placing a great deal of emphasis on the object and its modifiers. This congregation of “singers,” *canentes*, gives thanks for the day, but

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<sup>334</sup> Ambrose, “Deus creator omnium,” 4.7.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.2-4.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.6-8.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.9-12



prays for the night to come. It has already been established that the night is met with anxious lamentation. The night was a continuation of their struggle, which hinged on the successful adoption of their votive offering. Although this hymn surprisingly lacks many of the Virgilian references found in the other hymns, Fontaine notes a connection between *voti reos* and the act of sacrifice in the *Aeneid*.<sup>338</sup> Ambrose further emphasizes the connection of the classical *voti* with the “singers of hymns,” *hymnorum canentes*, by placing this subject in the final line of the stanza. By doing so, Ambrose once again conflates the classical with his current Christian audience. His hymns become the sacrifices awaiting the creator’s approval.

In a later stanza, Ambrose references prayer and struggle at the coming or “ascent,” *exortu*, of the night. Although the historical context seems to suggest a direct reference to Ambrose’s congregation suffering through a long siege, the hymn itself refers to the inner turmoil of the singers. Night presents even the purest of souls with its own challenges. Ambrose cautions: “Do not allow your mind to sleep,” *Dormire mentem ne sinas*.<sup>339</sup> He then advises his listeners to “temper the ardor of sleep with the refreshing coolness of chaste faith,” *castis fides refrigerans / somni vaporem temperet*.<sup>340</sup> Chaste faith is vital to the struggling Christian and must not be abandoned in the late hours of the night. This exhortation for chastity seems to refer to the general turmoil of nighttime rather than the specific struggle of his congregation. The emphasis on faith is a clear reminder of what that specific struggle was about. *Castis* therefore may not specifically reference sexual abstinence, but may instead be used to emphasize unwavering devotion to faith itself.

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<sup>338</sup> Fontaine, 248.

<sup>339</sup> Ambrose, “Deus creator omnium,” 4.21.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.23-4.

The final stanza of this hymn offers a clear declaration of the Trinitarian cause. Ambrose concludes with a prayer addressing all three natures of his God the creator: “We ask Christ, the Father and the spirit of Christ and the Father, one power through all, sustain us praying, Trinity.” *Christum rogamus et Patrem / Christi patrisque Spiritum / unum potens per Omnia; fove precantes, Trinitas.*<sup>341</sup> Ending the hymn with *Trinitas* leaves an interesting degree of ambiguity in its translation. In his own critical edition, Fontaine chooses to add a comma between *precantes* and *Trinitas*. This leads the reader to interpret Trinity as a subject in apposition with *Christi, patrem*, etc... The placement of *Trinitas* after *precantes* suggests that this final request is for God to nourish or sustain those who are praying, “Trinity,” in other words those who proclaim their faith in the Trinity by singing it out loud. This interpretation makes *Deus creator omnium* Ambrose’s most clear response to the political events transpiring around him.

After examining these undisputed Ambrosian hymns, a number of common themes become evident. The nature of God is particularly important subject matter in each instance. Special emphasis is made to demonstrate the role of God as a creator, with terms, such as *conditor, creator* and *polique rector*, used to demonstrate God’s role in creation. Creation is an important moment in the Arian debate because answering the question of Christ’s relationship with this creative force is paramount. Christ’s coeternal relationship is hinted at the end of *Iam surgit hora tertia* and then blatantly stated in *Deus creator omnium*. It is understandable for Augustine to single out these particular hymns in his Confessions. They deal specifically with the Arian debate, which has caused Ambrose to hold the basilica in protest, but they work as a generic statement of Trinitarian faith as well. The organization of these hymns as a collection of Vigil prayer

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<sup>341</sup> Ambrose, “Deus creator omnium,” 4.29-32.

recitations also made them useful for posterity. Augustine was trying to explain what made Ambrose so influential, and the production of these hymns is evidence enough for his lasting contribution to Latin literature.

Augustine's personal testimony to the authenticity of these hymns does not preclude the existence of other genuine Ambrosian hymns, sung during the siege. Another theme common to the three authentic hymns discussed above is the common struggle of Christians in defense of *fides* or faith. In *Aeterne rerum conditor*, the image of Peter wavering in his faith is dramatically resolved at the crowing of the cock, when "faith is returned to the lapsed," *lapsis fides revertitur*.<sup>342</sup> Whether Peter, *petra ecclesiae*, refers to Saint Peter or the church itself is left for the listener to decide.<sup>343</sup> *Iam surgit hora tertia* describes the ultimate sacrifice of Christ and relates it to the more personal struggle of the Virgin Mary.<sup>344</sup> *Deus creator omnium* discusses the need for "unwavering faith," *castis fides*, when faced with the metaphorical threat of impending night.<sup>345</sup> These notions of struggle and perseverance of faith in the face of adversity are also found in Ambrose's hymns dedicated to specific martyrs. Although there is no direct evidence which can confirm their usage at this specific point in time, several of Ambrose's martyr hymns are considered authentic as well.<sup>346</sup> A careful examination *Agnes beatae virginis* along with two additional martyr hymns will help establish a relative time frame for their production and usage.

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<sup>342</sup> Ambrose, "Aeterne rerum conditor," 1.24.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.15.

<sup>344</sup> Ambrose, "Iam surgit hora tertia" 3.17-20.

<sup>345</sup> Ambrose, "Deus creator omnium," 4.23.

<sup>346</sup> Walpole, 20; Fontaine, 93-102. Walpole and Fontaine both accept Biraghi's supposition that "Agnes beatae virginis," "Victor nabor felix pii," "Grates, tibi iesu novas," and "Apostolorum passio," are all authentic Ambrosian hymns. Fontaine, 100. Fontaine doubts the authenticity of "Apostolorum supparem."

## AGNES BEATAE VIRGINIS

*Agnes beatae virginis* meets all the criteria of an authentic Ambrosian hymn on linguistic grounds. The few scholars that continue to discredit this hymn as an authentic production by Ambrose do so because of its apparent incompatibility with Ambrose's earlier account in *De virginibus*.<sup>347</sup> *Agnes beatae virginibus*—in fact—appears to have more in common with the *elogium* of Damasus than it does with *De virginibus*. A careful examination of the poem's content will help illustrate the complex relationship between these two works. In *De virginibus*, Ambrose uses Agnes as only one of many other *exempla* in a collection designed to extoll the virtues of an ascetic lifestyle. This particular hymn was written at a different time and for a different purpose. Justina's promotion of Arianism and her desire to undermine Ambrose's authority served as the ultimate negative *exemplum* of female virtue. In the hymns discussed above, *castis* and *pudoris* are associated with proper devotion to *fides* or faith. This theme is emphasized further in *Agnes beatae virginibus*, a hymn that portrays Agnes as a positive *exemplum* opposed to the lurking threat of Justina, a queen Ambrose likens to the biblical Jezebel.

Ascribing an exact date to *Agnes beatae virginis* is problematic because Augustine never refers to it specifically as he does in the case of the other hymns. There is some evidence in the hymn itself which may link it to the initial conflict after the seizure of the Portian basilica in January 386. Ambrose commemorates the birth of the saint in the first stanza of the hymn. If taken literally, this would refer to the martyr's feast day on January 21: "It is the birthday of the blessed virgin Agnes," *Agnes beatae virginis / natalis est...*<sup>348</sup> *De virginibus* also refers to the martyr's feast day and the

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<sup>347</sup> Dudden, 293-7.

<sup>348</sup> Ambrose, "Agnes beatae virginis," 8.1-2.

reference to Agnes' *natalis* in the hymn might simply be used to link the hymn to the earlier account. Such an association would be important because Ambrose can use the hymn to draw attention to one of his earliest works, which presumably his supporters were familiar with. It is nevertheless interesting to note that McLynn places Auxentius' January law, which inspired these tensions during Holy Week, on January 23, 386, putting it very close to Agnes' feast day.<sup>349</sup> Additionally, Ambrose's epistle concerning the events was addressed to his sister Marcellina, the same recipient of *De virginibus*. These details do not guarantee that the Agnes hymn was produced at this time, but it is certainly possible that Ambrose had the example of Agnes from his earlier writings on his mind at the time of this conflict.

In the second stanza, Ambrose makes an association with the *elogium* of Damasus: "She was mature <enough> for martyrdom, not yet mature for marriage," *matura martyrio fuit, / matura nondum nuptiis*.<sup>350</sup> Her extreme youth is emphasized in both *De virginibus* and the *elogium*, but the emphasis on her maturity and willing acceptance of the normally adult symbol of Christian sacrifice has more in common with the Damasus account: "Having leapt from the lap of her nurse having suddenly ceased to be a girl, she willingly *spurned* the rage and threats of a savage tyrant," *a / nutricis gremium subito liquisse puellam;/ sponte trucis calcasse minas, rabiemque tyranni*.<sup>351</sup> In *De virginibus*, Ambrose emphasized her extreme passivity, but in this hymn he chooses to portray her as a victor rather than a victim. This change in tone demonstrates the different circumstances surrounding each Ambrosian account.

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<sup>349</sup> McLynn, 186.

<sup>350</sup> Ambrose, "Agnes beatae virginis," 8.5-6.

<sup>351</sup> Damasus, "Carmen XXIX," *PLL* 13, 402-3.

In the above hymns, especially in *Aeterne Rerum Conditor*, Ambrose fuses common classical and biblical poetic motifs; he does the same in the Agnes hymn. The third stanza is particularly evocative of classical Roman elegy: Her parents, “terrified with fear, enlarged the lock on her modesty, but her faith, unknowing of restraint, loosened her from her guarded doors,” *Metu parentes territi / claustrum pudoris auxerat; / soluit fores custodiae / fides teneri nescia.*<sup>352</sup> The words *claustrum*, and *fores custodiae* evoke a common scene of the lover barred from his beloved’s door. Jaques Fontaine points out some obvious connections with the *paraklausithyron*, a common poetic motif in classical elegy in which the outcast lover begs at the door of his beloved, and the Agnes hymn:

Les thèmes classiques de la jeune fille emprisonnée – Danaé captive sous le bronze de sa tour (Hor. Carm. 3,16,1-8), ou Rhéa Silvia – et du cortège nuptial (Catvll. Carm. 61) sont d’autant plus aisément exploités ici au profit de la propagande pour la virginité.<sup>353</sup>

Fontaine sees the reference to classical female *exemplum* as nothing more than supplying a necessary vocabulary to Ambrose where scripture is lacking. But comparing Agnes with classical women is common in Damasus and Prudentius as well. These authors envisioned Agnes as a new Christian hero to complement popular Roman women, such as Rhea Silvia and Lucretia.

This *paraklausithyron* motif in the third stanza helps to emphasize Agnes’ own sense of personal choice at the beginning of the fourth stanza: “One would believe her to march to her marriage, she was led out with such a joyful demeanor,” *Prodire quis nuptum putet, / sic laeta vultu ducitur.*<sup>354</sup> This is an interesting addition to the relationship

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<sup>352</sup> Ambrose, “Agnes beatae virginis,” 8.9-12.

<sup>353</sup> Fontaine, 387.

<sup>354</sup> Ambrose, “Agnes beatae virginis,” 8.13-14.

between Agnes and her parents. There is some ambiguity between the “holy parents,” *sanctos parentes* in Damasus and their “stern faces,” *torvos vultus*, in *De virginibus*.<sup>355</sup> The parents in Damasus’ *elogium* appear to be devoted Christians who embrace the heroic death of their daughter, while Agnes’ decision to shun marriage is met with stern disapproval in *De virginibus*. In this hymn, the parents protect their daughter’s “modesty,” *pudoris*, but in their own natural capacity as her guardians, which may have nothing to do with Agnes’ faith. She in a sense violates their desire to lock her up by escaping and marching proudly to her own martyrdom, a deed often described as a holy marriage to Christ. This portrayal of Agnes’ parents seems to embrace aspects of both the *elogium* and *De virginibus*, perhaps in an effort to reconcile them.

Agnes is not marched to an altar of marriage but to one of sacrifice. She must submit to burning incense to the Roman *numina*, something she will not do: “She is driven to the altars of the abominable gods to burn incense,” *Aras nefandi numinis / adolere taedis cogitur*.<sup>356</sup> The *aras nefandi numinis* contrast sharply with Agnes in the hymn, who is praised in the first stanza for her “sacred, pious blood,” *pio sacrata sanguine*.<sup>357</sup> The vocabulary is evocative of Aeneas who is the perpetually pious, quintessential Roman. Agnes is also a quintessentially pious Roman, but one who achieves her sacred status from refusing to worship “abominable gods,” *nefandi numinis*, while Aeneas was pious in his devotion to them.

Remarkably, Ambrose recounts the actual words of defiance that Agnes delivers to her persecutors. Neither the *elogium* nor *De virginibus* allows Agnes the opportunity to speak for herself:

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<sup>355</sup> Damasus, “Carmen XXIX,” *PLL* 13; Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” I.2.8, *PLL* 16.

<sup>356</sup> Ambrose, “Agnes beatae virginis,” 8.17-18.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.4.

She responds: “Not at all will such fires consume the virgins of Christ. This fire extinguishes faith. This flame steals away the light. Here, here strike! So that I might extinguish those brands with my flowing blood.”

*Respondet: << Haud tales faces / sumpsere Christi virgines; / hic ignis exstinguit fidem, haec flamma lumen eripit./ Hic hic ferrite! ut profluo / cruore restinguam focos>>.*<sup>358</sup>

Ambrose uses this statement to reconcile his earlier account of Agnes’ death (by the sword) with the one in Damasus’ *elogium* (by fire). In this hymn, Agnes scorns the fire and embraces the sword, because of the perverse nature of the flame itself. She demands to be executed by sword so that she can extinguish the flame that extinguishes faith.

Fontaine considers this particular episode to reference the rape of Polyxena in classical literature: “Le véritable modèle de l’hymnode est la figure de Polyxène peinte par Euripide et Ovide: le poète chrétien en propose une retraction destinée à montrer en Agnès la supériorité de la pudeur d’une vierge chrétienne.”<sup>359</sup> Polyxena was the youngest daughter of King Priam, whom willingly offered herself to the Greeks for sacrifice at the end of the Trojan War. This account is quite common and can be found in Virgil and Seneca as well. The classical motif of sacrificing oneself for virginity is also characteristic of Livy’s Lucretia. This was an important motif for Christian authors to embrace for the sake of winning pagan supporters to the “superiority” of Christian virginity. Agnes served as the prime example of this form of Christian self-sacrifice.

Although this aspect of self-sacrifice is important, it is the act of defiance that is particularly significant in this account. In this hymn, Agnes does not passively bend her head to the sword; she demands it. The defiance of Agnes in this hymn is impossible to reconcile with the girl of *De virginibus* who simply “stood, prayed and bent down her

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<sup>358</sup> Ambrose, “Agnes beatae virginis,” 8.19-24.

<sup>359</sup> Fontaine, 400.



neck,” *Stetit, oravit, cervicem inflexit.*<sup>360</sup> Although Damasus does not provide Agnes with a voice in his own account, he characterizes her as a willful individual who fights for what she believes in: “She willingly *spurned* the rage and threats of a savage tyrant; She willed her noble body to burn in flames. With her small strength she overcame immense fear,” *Sponte trucis calcasse minas, rabiemque tyranni: / Urere cum flammis voluisset nobile corpus, / Viribus immensum parvis superasse timorem.*<sup>361</sup> She is willful in the hymn as well. She has to be in order to preserve the one thing that grants her this authority—her faith.

Faith or *fides* is what is key in this particular hymn, just as it is an important component in every other hymn examined thus far. In her speech Agnes wishes to extinguish the fire, which “extinguishes faith,” *hic ignis exstinguit fidem.*<sup>362</sup> The Agnes hymn forces those singers who recited it to vehemently defend their own faith by reliving Agnes’ experience. Agnes is a living embodiment of the *castis fides*, the chaste or unwavering faith that Ambrose expects his supporters to adhere to. Just as the cock called the wavering Peter back to his faith in *Aeterne rerum conditor*, Agnes reinforces the resolve of Ambrose’s wavering congregation. To recite the words of the martyr is to become the martyr. A martyr is after all simply reliving the ultimate sacrifice performed by Christ. The hymn allows the congregation to witness Agnes in the same way she witnessed Christ.

In the final stanza of the poem, Ambrose reconnects with the theme of modesty from his *De virginibus* account: “In death she was modest [just as] she used to live,” *In*

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<sup>360</sup> Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” I.2.9.

<sup>361</sup> Damasus, “Carmen XXIX.”

<sup>362</sup> Ambrose, “Agnes beatae virginis,” 8.21.

*morte vivebat pudor.*<sup>363</sup> Modesty is ironically her executioner in the final line of this hymn. The executioner's blow is not mentioned, only implied. As Agnes kneels down to receive the deathblow, Ambrose ends with an ambiguous line: "She sought the ground with bent knee, falling with fallen shame," *terram genu flexo petit / lapsu verecundo cadens.*<sup>364</sup> Fontaine calls this alliance of *lapsu* and *verecundo* as an oxymoron used to emphasize the impeccable nature of Agnes.<sup>365</sup> *Lapsu* is often used to express a fault, while *verecundo* captures the negative aspects of modesty in the sense of shame or bashfulness. Perhaps it is intended as a subtle criticism of the extreme modesty of the Saint. It may be more appropriate to view it as a double entendre where the act of execution (*cadens*) indicates that Agnes is now liberated (*lapsu*) from her shame (*verecundo*). The hymn addresses details found in *De virginibus* but also subtly adds to them in a way to bolster the character of the seemingly passive figure presented in that earlier account.

The hymn ends with the word "falling," *cadens.*<sup>366</sup> Ambrose uses the present participle to indicate that the act of death has not been completed. He ends his hymn right before the executioner's sword slices into Agnes' neck. Why would he choose to ignore the ever-important passion narrative in this hymn? Ambrose wants his audience to feel as if they are reliving the act of martyrdom themselves. As the choir recites the hymn, they speak Agnes' words of defiance and await their own moment of victory as the sword plunges down upon them. One would not expect a martyr in the act of dying to recall

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<sup>363</sup> Ambrose, "Agnes beatae virginis," 8.29.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.31-2.

<sup>365</sup> Fontaine, 403.

<sup>366</sup> Ambrose, "Agnes beatae virginis," 8.32.

anymore than this. Once the deed is done the martyr is—after all—transported to a different, heavenly realm.

## THE END OF THE PERSECUTION

The second siege, which occurred during Holy Week, lasted for several days. The emperor finally chose to resolve the situation by sending a *notarius* to Ambrose with an ultimatum. He was required to select his own judges for a formal debate to be held between him and Auxentius or he would be charged with *contumacia* or willful disobedience to imperial authority.<sup>367</sup> Epistle 21, addressed to the emperor himself, is a formal reply to this ultimatum:

If I must perform, I have learned to perform in a church: as my predecessors did, if a conference must be held on matters of faith, it should be a gathering of priests, just as it was done under the emperor Constantine of august memory, who laid down no laws beforehand, but gave the freedom [of] judgment to the priests.

*Si tractandum, tractare in Ecclesia dedici: quod maiores fecerunt mei. Si conferendum de fide, sacerdotum debet esse ista collatio, sicut factum est sub Constantino augustae memoriae principe, qui nullas leges ante praemisit, sed liberum dedit iudicium sacerdotibus.*<sup>368</sup>

Ambrose and Valentinian were at a seemingly insurmountable impasse. No debate could take place if Ambrose was unwilling to accept Auxentius as priest capable of handling such a task. Although Valentinian was willing to threaten Ambrose, he was unwilling or unable to follow up on those threats.<sup>369</sup>

The issue stagnated until the completion of the Nova basilica in the *Hortus Philippi* of Milan in June of 386.<sup>370</sup> Due to all the trouble he had in securing his authority

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<sup>367</sup> McLynn, 202.

<sup>368</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” 21.15, *PLL* 16.

<sup>369</sup> McLynn, 202.

<sup>370</sup> Although it is uncertain that this church was the nova basilica fought over in the dispute, McLynn believes that its location in the Hortus Philippi makes it likely that it was the same church. See, McLynn,

over the churches of Milan, Ambrose was ready to fight for this new basilica. McLynn notes the importance of the site:

This large and lavishly decorated basilica was Ambrose's personal stake in the Hortus Phillipi, the most venerable part of Christian Milan; it had been designed to annex the adjacent chapel of the martyr Victor, where the bishop's brother Satorus was buried.<sup>371</sup>

This basilica was new and beautiful; it was located in the correct place, and it was linked to one of Milan's more prominent martyr cults at the time. The burial of Satorus here confirms the notion that this particular location had been on the bishop's mind since the beginning of his tenure as bishop.

Ambrose identified himself and his beleaguered congregation with struggling martyrs in both his letters to Marcellina and in his hymns. But Ambrose was not a martyr and could not claim the authority or prestige of a martyr. For Ambrose, this was a problem that he needed to overcome. This new basilica would provide him with a unique solution. Although Ambrose could not become a martyr himself, he could find new martyrs to associate himself with. In a new letter to Marcellina in June 386, Ambrose recounts the joyful discovery of the bones of Protasius and Gervasius, whom the ramblings of a possessed woman revealed to be located at the site of the new basilica already being called the Basilica Ambrosiana.<sup>372</sup> In his letter, he recounts his words to the Milanese people who witnessed this impressive discovery or *inventio* of the new martyrs: "I am not able to deny that I am not worthy to be a martyr, but I *have* [my emphasis] acquired these martyrs for you," *Negare non possum, et quia ipse martyr esse non*

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191-95; Krautheimer seems to support this point of view by locating the Basilica Nova inside the Hortus Phillippi. See Richard Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals: Topography and Politics* (University of California Press, 1983): 72-73.

<sup>371</sup> McLynn, 209.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 211-12.

*mereor, hos vobis martyris acquisivi.*<sup>373</sup> The bones of these martyrs, miraculously found covered in fresh blood, exuded a power that even Valentinian could not challenge: “And this blood shouts out with the stain of its color; this blood shouts out with functioning efficacy, the blood shouts out with the triumph of its passion,” *Et hic sanguis clamat coloris indicio; sanguis clamat operationis praeconio; sanguis clamat passionis triumpho.*<sup>374</sup> The *passio* of these martyrs declared a triumph—a triumph for Ambrose over those who wished to challenge his authority over the Milanese church.

This timely discovery can also be linked to further developments in Ambrosian hymnody. Two new martyr hymns can be linked to the discovery of Protasius and Gervasius, *Victor Nabor Felix pii*, and *Grates tibi iesu novas*. *Victor Nabor Felix pii* is dedicated to the original Milanese martyr cult, which would in effect be coopted by the new shrine to Protasius and Gervasius at the same church. Unlike the Vigil hymns and the Agnes hymn, Ambrose chooses to focus on the narrative of the martyrs’ passion. The sense of audience participation found in the above hymns is missing in *Victor Nabor Felix pii*. This may indicate that Ambrose produced the new hymn under different circumstances. The new hymn nevertheless embraces some of the common themes discussed thus far.

Ambrose uses the word *pious* to describe the martyrs, just as he did with Agnes: “Victor, Nabor and Felix, the pious martyrs of Milan...” *Victor Nabor Felix pii / Mediolani martyres...*<sup>375</sup> This immediately links these Christian heroes with the most praised quality of the classical hero Aeneas. This is a fitting connection because these martyrs were wanderers from a foreign land, just as Aeneas was: “our hosts, alone [from]

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<sup>373</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” 22.12.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 22.23.

<sup>375</sup> Ambrose, “Victor Nabor Felix pii,” 10.1-2.

the Maurian race, and strangers to our lands,” *solo hospites, Mauri genus / terrisque nostris advenae*.<sup>376</sup> Ambrose is already laying the groundwork for his new discovery. In this first stanza, he subtly dissociates the audience from these original Milanese martyrs while reinforcing the notion that even the most fundamental pillars of local Christianity originated from somewhere else. It sets the perfect context in which to replace the old martyrs (from Africa) with new local martyrs, dug up from the grounds of the city for everyone to see.

Although he emphasizes the foreign nature of these Maurian martyrs, they were still important to the Milanese church, and Ambrose uses them in his hymn to convey a message to his audience. Victor, Nabor, and Felix are soldiers who gain their martyrs’ crowns by refusing to remain in their impious camps: “These soldiers of Christ sought not iron spears, nor arms. They marched furnished with a weapon, those who possessed the true faith,” *Non tela quaerunt ferrea / non arma Christi milites; munitus armis ambulat / veram fidem qui possidet*.<sup>377</sup> These soldiers of Christ possessed true faith, which was the only weapon they ever needed. Ambrose is clever in how he uses this particular passion to quietly convey a message of civil disobedience. Christian soldiers must stand up against earthly tyranny. This earthly tyranny reflects the earthly tyranny of the emperor Valentinian, who refused to allow God’s appointed bishop to decide matters of faith. In the hymn, Victor, Nabor and Felix resist this type of tyranny and earn their martyr’s crown for it: “And triumphant death, which the envious tyrant sent for us to the town of Laudense,” *Et mors triumphus, quem invidens / nobis tyrannus ad oppidum /*

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<sup>376</sup> Ambrose, “Victor Nabor Felix pii,” 10.3-4.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.21-4.

*Laudense misit martyres.*<sup>378</sup> The *invidens tyrannus* would presumably represent Valentinian. Why would the pagan persecutor of Victor, Nabor and Felix be envious of those martyrs? Valentinian was jealous of the true authority of the current bishop of Milan.

Ambrose builds on this subtle suggestion of civil disobedience in “Grates Tibi, Iesu Novas.” He begins the hymn in imitation of classical epic: “New Thanks for you Jesus, I, discoverer of [these] new presents, the martyrs Protasius and Gervasius, sing!” *Grates tibi, Iesu, novas / novi repertor muneris / Protasio Geruasio / martyribus inventis cano.*<sup>379</sup> This line clearly echoes the opening of Virgil’s Aeneid. Ambrose acts as the muse for his own epic. He places himself the *repertor* or “discoverer” before the names of the martyrs themselves. Protasius and Gervasius are nothing but passive agents or “pious victims,” *piae...hostiae* of a passion long forgotten.<sup>380</sup> They exist as nothing more than relics to be controlled by the bishop of Milan. In the poem, Ambrose claims that God himself revealed the burial sight with rays of sunlight: “Shining from graceful heaven revealed the sacred members,” *Caelo refulgens gratia / artes revelavit sacros.*<sup>381</sup> But Ambrose is quick to note his own involvement in recognizing this miraculous event: “We are not able to be martyrs, but we have found martyrs,” *Nequimus esse martyres / sed repperimus martyres.*<sup>382</sup> This statement is reiterated in his letter to Marcellina, where Ambrose expounds on the importance of his new role as *inventor* of relics. Ambrose could trust this association with the martyrs to bring him real authority.

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<sup>378</sup> Ambrose, “Victor Nabor Felix Pii,” 10.26-29.

<sup>379</sup> Ambrose, “Grates tibi, Iesu, Novas,” 11.1-4

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.5.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.10-11.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.11-2.

The issue of faith is once again examined. In this hymn, Ambrose challenges the listener to believe his story on faith alone: “Who here requires the voices of witnesses, where faith is made,” *Hic quis requirat testium / voces ubi factum est fides?*<sup>383</sup> The listener who requires witnesses is one who lacks faith. Ambrose nevertheless knows that evidence will need to be provided in order to definitively prove that his claims are genuine. He recounts the miraculous healing of someone suffering a “possession of the mind,” *impos mentium*.<sup>384</sup> But this *impos* was no ordinary citizen. Ambrose identifies him as a public servant, linking him to the Imperial government: “Severus is the name of the man, used as a minister of the public,” *Severus est nomen viro / usus minister publici*.<sup>385</sup> Although the ailment is identified as possession, Ambrose recounts Severus’ miraculous healing in metaphorical terms: “The blind man received the light,” *Caecus recepto lumine*.<sup>386</sup> The blindness of this public minister hints at the challenge Ambrose still faced from servants of the imperial government. It is not a casting out of demons that is needed, but a simple return to soundness of mind.

Describing this imperial servant as *impos* suggests that the emperor himself is suffering possession at the hands of his own Arian demons. The discovery of Protasius and Gervasius helped illuminate the falseness of Ambrose’s Arian opposition. Although Severus is healed by the bones and blood of the newly discovered martyrs, it is not he but the gathered crowd which is released from a state of possession: “The crowd loosened from its bonds, free from the coils of the serpent, went to all the cities, came home and gave thanks,” *Soluta turba vinculis / spiris draconum libera / emissa totis urbibus /*

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<sup>383</sup> Ambrose, “Grates tibi, Iesu, novas,” 11.13-4.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.15.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.19-20.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.18.



*domum redit cum gratia.*<sup>387</sup> What chains bound the crowd of onlookers if not the chains of an oppressive tyrant? The miracle that healed Severus also healed the *populus* of Milan. The people were now free of the madness which had poisoned them. Although Ambrose is wise enough not to make this statement directly, the Protasius and Gervasius hymn seems to be an acknowledgment of his own triumph over the Arian faction in Milan. Ambrose was now the undisputed figure of authority whose discovery was associated with miraculous healing.

#### AMBROSIAN HYMNS AND THE BATTLE OVER FAITH

Ambrose built his reputation on the backs of famous martyrs just as Damasus had done in Rome. His hymns dedicated to Agnes, and Nabor, Victor and Felix reveal that he was more than willing to use martyrs that his congregation were familiar with to win over favor. The *inventio* of Protasius and Gervasius was simply an extension of a tried and true system. By finding the martyrs, Ambrose could insure complete control over their relics and act as temporal conduit to their holy power. The *inventio* has often been hailed as a crucial step towards medieval Christianity, but the real achievement was in Ambrose's ability to connect with his audience and subtly shape its perception of the surrounding political environment with its knowledge.<sup>388</sup> The role that the hymns play in this struggle cannot be overemphasized.

*Agnes beatae virginis* is unique for a number of reasons. It shares many of the themes of the undisputed Vigil hymns, but is not part of the Vigil cycle. It commemorates a famous figure who was as well-known in Milan as she was in Rome. Ambrose crafted a hymn that used the voice of this famous martyr to bolster his own authority. He put the

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<sup>387</sup> Ambrose, "Grates tibi, Iesu, novas," 11.25-9.

<sup>388</sup> Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 36-7.

words of the martyr directly into the mouth of his congregation, and for a moment they could feel the powerful resolve of that martyr. Ambrose was not immune to this effect. It is a wonder that Valentinian never had Ambrose arrested for acts that bordered on sedition. Valentinian and his mother Justina no doubt realized that execution would only intensify opposition to their cause. The Nova Basilica was more than a church; it was Ambrose's self-avowed final resting place. McLynn calls this a challenge to imperial authority as well: "Even if they killed him, the *martyrium* now ready for him would provide a focus for his people's continued loyalty."<sup>389</sup> The statement "we are not able to be martyrs," *Nequimus esse martyres*, suggests that Ambrose was disappointed that his opponents never accepted his challenge.<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> McLynn, 209.

<sup>390</sup> Ambrose, "Grates tibi, Iesu, novas," 11.11.

## CHAPTER 5: *PERISTEPHANON*: THE IBERIAN APPROPRIATION OF THE AGNES CULT

Aurelius Prudentius Clemens was a Christian poet who epitomized the unique qualities of his age—a time when the Roman world struggled to reconcile its classical past and its Christian future. Prudentius realized this better than most. Every poem he wrote in some way attempts to resolve this ambiguity of being both *Roman* and *Christian*. Prudentius produced his poems in response to many of the developments already discussed in the chapters above. His collection of hagiographic poetry, referred to as the *Peristephanon*, is of particular importance to this discussion. This collection of fourteen lyric martyr hymns repeatedly reveals the influence of both Damasus and Ambrose on his work. Yet the exact relationship between these three near-contemporaries is still lacking. The martyrdom of Agnes once again plays a key role here. By examining Prudentius' own Agnes hymn in the *Peristephanon* and its connection with the earlier accounts of Ambrose and Damasus, one can see the influence which each had on him. By separating the poet from his sources, the originality of Prudentius and his own influence in shaping female hagiography also becomes clear.

An examination of the scholarship on Prudentius reveals a lack of attention given to the *Peristephanon* in relation to his other works. Scholars have written more about his epic *Psychomachia*—a poem written as an allegory in which anthropomorphized vices and virtues clash in true Virgilian style.<sup>391</sup> The *Peristephanon* did not receive individual attention until Anne-Marie Palmer produced a thorough introduction to the work in 1989.

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<sup>391</sup> See Anne-Marie Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1989); Michael Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs* (University of Michigan Press, 1993); Martha A. Malmud, *A Poetics of Transformation: Prudentius and Classical Mythology* (London: Cornell University Press, 1989). For works specifically focusing on *Psychomachia*, see Macklin Smith, *Prudentius' Psychomachia: A Reexamination* (Princeton University Press, 1976); S Georgia Nugent, *Allegory and Poetics: the structure and imagery of Prudentius' "Psychomachia"* (Frankfurt am Main: Studien zur Klassischen Philologie, 1985); James J Paxon, *The Poetics of Personification* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Palmer does an admirable job attempting to contextualize the poem. She recognizes Prudentius' zeal for popularizing the martyr cults of his own native Spain. She considers Damasus a natural source of influence because the bishop of Rome was also reportedly born on the Iberian peninsula. Theodosius too had a local connection to Prudentius as the "Spanish" emperor: "His main interest is to describe for Spanish readers the latest constructions in the martyrs' honour, both of which were associated with compatriots: the Spanish Pope Damasus and his fellow countryman, the Emperor Theodosius."<sup>392</sup> This statement may appear anachronistically nationalistic to some. Palmer nevertheless emphasizes that this sense of local pride is a key to understanding the *Peristephanon*. Each martyr is linked to a locale, and many of those locales are found in Spain, particularly those found in the earliest hymns of the collection.

Michael Roberts further examines this role of locale in his own book on the *Peristephanon*. After looking over a number of Prudentius' hymns, Roberts chooses to focus his attention on *Peristephanon* 9, 11, and 12. These three hymns are of particular importance to Roberts' own variation of Palmer's thesis. According to Roberts, Prudentius' chief endeavor is to connect the Passion of a martyr to the sacred space of his or her cult, a space usually associated with the act of death itself. This association helps to dissolve the barrier of time, granting the patron of the shrine the ability to experience the martyrdom more completely: "Prudentius shares this sense that in the sacred place of a martyr's shrine and in the text of a martyr's passion, that passion is made present."<sup>393</sup> This makes *Pe.* 9, 11 and 12 uniquely significant because these accounts describe the shrine of the martyr in particular detail. These hymns are found towards the end of the

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<sup>392</sup> Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs*, 255.

<sup>393</sup> Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs*, 193.

*Peristephanon* and consist of what seems to be a pilgrimage taken by the author to Rome itself. Two of the three hymns actually relate to Damasan *elogia*. Roberts emphasizes Damasus' influence in this particular part of the *Peristephanon* but considers the connection between the Damasan *elogium* and the Prudentius' final hymn to Agnes to be negligible.<sup>394</sup> This lack of evidence needs to be examined in greater detail, but Roberts is correct in noticing that a direct correlation between *Pe.* 14 (the Agnes hymn) and Damasus is difficult to establish.

Martha Malmud has produced a detailed literary analysis of Prudentius' entire corpus, with emphasis on the *Peristephanon*. Malmud is more interested in the references to classical myth found in Prudentius' poems than she is in contextualizing them. She recognizes the fact that Prudentius has no interest in accurately preserving the historical evidence surrounding a martyr. Prudentius was prone to confuse two martyrs with one another or simply invent details where it suited him. Malmud uses the conflation of the martyr Cyprian of Carthage with a completely different Romantic figure, Cyprian of Antioch, as an example of imaginative poetry designed to appeal to his learned, aristocratic audience. Malmud casts no aspersions upon Prudentius' lack of historical credibility, choosing instead to examine what Prudentius the poet felt was most important about the martyr: "Cyprianus derived from Cypris, one of the goddess Venus' titles, taken from her association with the island of Cyprus."<sup>395</sup> The etymological wordplay present in the name was too much for Prudentius to resist. According to Malmud, Prudentius conflates these two different Cyprians to produce a poem reflecting the classical background of the martyr's city: "Prudentius creates a character who epitomizes

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<sup>394</sup> Roberts, 51-52.

<sup>395</sup> Malmud, *A Poetics of Transformation*, 116.

the seductive and sometimes violent force of eros and thus, as we shall see, is a martyr peculiarly appropriate to the city of Carthage as it appears in Roman history and literature.”<sup>396</sup> Prudentius is thus attempting to fuse classical and Christian tradition in order to appeal to an audience steeped in classical education.

Much of this recent scholarship on the *Peristephanon* has emerged in the wake of Peter Brown’s seminal work on late antiquity. Malmud begins her book by citing Brown’s own criticism of what he calls the “two-tier approach” to the model of religion.<sup>397</sup> In *The Cult of the Saints*, Brown expounds on the problems of viewing religion as a simple interaction between commoner and aristocrat:

Rather than present the rise of the cult of the saints in terms of a dialogue between two parties, the few and the many, let us attempt to see it as a part of a greater whole—the lurching forward of an increasing proportion of late antique society toward radically new forms of reverence...<sup>398</sup>

Prudentius is key to understanding the limitations of this “two tier” approach. He is a member of the local aristocracy, steeped in classical education, trying desperately to find itself in a world overrun by the new religion. The poet writes his poetry to make the evolving world of the martyr cult accessible to the “few” who can read his work and appreciate it. Ultimately, this work adds to the dialogue between the two thus erasing the barrier between the reader and itinerant cult member. In *Wandering Monks, Virgins, and Pilgrims*, Maribel Dietz describes how Prudentius used his visual form of poetry to recreate the journey to the cultic site:

The paintings, combined with the inscriptions, oral testimony of the attendant, and the antique look of the shrine, served to prove the truth of the martyrdoms.

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<sup>396</sup> Malmud, 116.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>398</sup> Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 21-22.

Prudentius's poems not only brought to life these martyr stories, they also served as miniature journeys.<sup>399</sup>

The upper echelons of society embrace the classicized Christianity offered by the poet while popular hagiographic tradition evolves into a form of Christianized classicism, preserving Roman tradition in a new form. Yet this is only one aspect of Prudentius' work. A careful analysis of the *Praefatio* along with some of the more significant hymns will help to contextualize the *Peristphanon* as a whole as well as the specific account of Agnes in *Pe.* 14.

#### A PREFACE TO A LIFE

There is little that can be said about who Prudentius was or how he functioned in late antique society. His work has survived the test of time far better than knowledge of the man himself. Most of the biographical evidence comes from a general *Praefatio* written late in his literary career: "For fifty years I have lived, if I am not mistaken, and beyond that seven times the pole turns, while I enjoy the circling sun." *Per quinquennia iam decem, / ni fallor, fuimus; septimus insuper / annum cardo rotat, dum fruimur sole volubili.*<sup>400</sup> It is interesting that Prudentius chooses to begin a preface to his life's work by revealing his age. Fifty-seven was not extreme old age, but it is reasonable to assume that he considered this moment in life to be a crucial point of reflection. It was a time to compile and organize his poetry and give it a more coherent meaning. There is some evidence to suggest that the threat of death was on his mind: "And yet, close to a final end, let <my> sinner soul cast off its foolishness." *Atque fine sub ultimo / peccatrix*

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<sup>399</sup> Maribel Dietz, *Wandering Monks, Virgins and Pilgrims: Ascetic Travel in the Mediterranean World* (Penn State University Press, 2005): 159.

<sup>400</sup> Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, "Praefatio," 1-3, H.J. Thomas, ed., *LCL* 378 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949): 3.

*anima stultitiam exuat*.<sup>401</sup> Palmer tentatively dates the *Praefatio* to the year 404 C.E.<sup>402</sup> She also notes that it is unlikely that he lived past 410 C.E., as the sack of Rome by the Goths is never mentioned in his poetry.<sup>403</sup> Much of his work focuses on Rome and the prestige of a new Christian empire. It is difficult to imagine that he would ignore such a pivotal event in recent history. If he did indeed live through this event, he must have had concerns beyond the composition of poetry.

There are other details about his life preserved in the *Praefatio*. He was born under Salia's consulship, probably in 348 C.E.<sup>404</sup> He was trained in rhetoric and received the *toga virilis*.<sup>405</sup> He then began a career in civil service that culminated in the governorship of two "famous cities," *nobilium reximus urbium*.<sup>406</sup> His distinguished career garnered the attention of the emperor Theodosius, who elevated him to what he describes as "the nearest rank," *ordine proximo*.<sup>407</sup> All of these details are important for establishing the basic framework of his life, but they speak little of the scope and ambition of his poetry. The production of the *Praefatio* itself provides the biggest clue.

It has already been stated that the late date of its composition indicates a need to collect and organize his *corpus poeticum*. The lyrical style of the poem may also be a clue to understanding this endeavor. Palmer notes that lyric was fundamental to the *Peristephanon*.<sup>408</sup> Although the *Peristephanon* is a collection of poems written over the course of a long literary career, Prudentius nevertheless attempts to organize them for a specific purpose. Many of the hymns near the end of the *Peristephanon* follow a similar

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<sup>401</sup> Prudentius, "Praefatio," 34-35.

<sup>402</sup> Palmer, 17.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>404</sup> Palmer, 22; "Praefatio," 24.

<sup>405</sup> "Praefatio," 6-8.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>408</sup> Palmer, 20.



stylistic pattern. This is the reason Roberts focuses on *Pe.* 9, 11, and 12 as the core group of pilgrimage hymns. The final hymn to Agnes also follows this pattern and fits quite well into an *itinerarium* to the city of Rome mentioned at the beginning of *Pe.* 9: “Here when I sought you, Rome greatest of places, the hope arose that Christ would be favorable to me.” *Hic mihi, cum peterem te rerum maxima Roma / spes est oberta prosperum Christum fore.*<sup>409</sup> These Roman hymns seem to have been composed at a different time than the early Spanish ones, making them a pivotal part of an attempt to turn a random assortment of hymns into a lyrical masterwork. This culminates at the end of the collection with *Pe.* 14—the ever important hymn to Agnes.

Understanding this process requires more information than the meager evidence found in the *Praefatio*. Finding context for this poetry is a struggle in which the burden of evidence often loses out to interpretation. This does not mean that the poetry exists in a vacuum. Evidence for Prudentius’ intent and influence can be seen in almost every line. Even the meter itself provides telling clues. The meter of the *Peristephanon* is far from uniform. Early attempts were made by scholars to reconcile the somewhat distasteful shifts in form found throughout the collection. F.J. Raby describes the *Peristephanon* as a mixed genre: “It presents a new genus of poem, a combination of epic and lyric which can almost be described as a ballad.”<sup>410</sup> Raby’s understanding of the *Peristephanon* as a lyrical ballad is adopted by Palmer as well.<sup>411</sup> It is far more likely that many of these stylistic discrepancies resulted from the compilation of several poems into one major work at a relatively late date.

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<sup>409</sup> Prudentius, “Peristephanon,” Hymn IX, 3-4,, *LCL* 398.

<sup>410</sup> F.J. Raby, *Christian Latin Poetry, Vol. I* (Oxford University Press, 1927): 50.

<sup>411</sup> Palmer, 4.

Palmer's research on the *Peristephanon* seems to confirm this hypothesis. She begins by noting how drastically the poems vary in length, anywhere from eighteen lines (*Pe.* 8) to a colossal eleven hundred and forty lines (*Pe.* 10).<sup>412</sup> Palmer points out that *Pe.* 10 is so long and out of place that it is universally regarded as a later addition.<sup>413</sup> This of course does not mean that the placement of this hymn in the collection is insignificant (a more detailed look at *Pe.* 10 found below will help to shed light on Prudentius' intentions here). Palmer has also analyzed the metrical form of each of the hymns. She finds evidence that Prudentius mimicked the popular Ambrosian hymns developed by the bishop of Milan only decades before. It has already been stated that Ambrose was the first to develop the popular type of church hymn—formed of thirty-two lines—where classical quantity could mingle with the increasing desire for accented poetry. Palmer notes that Prudentius chose the iambic dimeter of Ambrose for *Pe.* 2 and *Pe.* 5.<sup>414</sup> These hymns were composed for Lawrence and Vincent respectively. They therefore are the closest in form to proper church hymns and represent the earliest compositions of the collection.

Unlike the hymns of Ambrose, the lyrical poems of the *Peristephanon* were not sung aloud during mass.<sup>415</sup> Classical lyric poetry was intended to draw the reader into a personal, emotional experience. Perhaps this is why Prudentius composes a *praefatio* lamenting the “sinner soul,” *peccatrix anima*, of a worn out poet. If age and death are on the reader's mind, he or she can take solace in reading fantastic tales of Christian heroes who have conquered death. Prudentius' conclusion to the *Peristephanon* in *Pe.* 14 could

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<sup>412</sup> Palmer 70.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, 64, 73.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-75.

not be more personal: “I shall be purged by the brightness of your promising face, if you will fill my liver. Nothing is immodest which you deem worthy to meet with kindness or to touch with your pious foot.” *Purgabor oris propitiabilis / fulgore, nostrum si iecur inpleas. / nil non pudicum est quod pia visere / dignaris almo vel pede tangere.*<sup>416</sup>

Malmud notes that the *iecur* or liver was the seat of emotion in the classical mindset.<sup>417</sup>

Prudentius—much like Damasus—has enlisted the power of the martyr as intercessor at the end of the poem. Prudentius is no longer the world-weary spirit of the *praefatio*.

Agnes has purged the *peccatrix anima* of his sin with the purity of her shining gaze.

## MARTYR AS EPIC HERO

In order to find evidence to support the notion that the poems of the *Peristephanon* were composed at different times, one needs to examine several key hymns in order to establish a timeline for their evolution. *Pe. 2* and *Pe. 5* seem to be a natural starting point for this task. These two poems are discussed together because of the number of similarities they share. Stylistically, both poems adopt the iambic dimeter of Ambrose and both are exactly the same length at five hundred and eighty-four lines.<sup>418</sup> This suggests that Prudentius wrote these hymns shortly after becoming acquainted with his work, as these poems are the closest Ambrosian imitators. A study of style alone however can only reveal so much. The martyrs covered in these two hymns reveal something about authorial intent. Lawrence (*Pe. 2*) and Vincent (*Pe. 5*) are two figures that are remarkably alike. Both engage in rhetorical battles with tyrannical pagan authorities in defense of Christianity. Both suffer a similar fate, being burned alive over a

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<sup>416</sup> Prudentius, “Peristephanon,” Hymn XIV, 130-133.

<sup>417</sup> Malmud, 176.

<sup>418</sup> Palmer, 245.

grill. They differ in one key respect. While Vincent is a native deacon of Saragossa in Spain, Lawrence is a martyred deacon of Rome. Even at this early phase in the development of the *Peristephanon*, Prudentius chooses to compare the native martyrs of Spain with the more renowned martyrs of Rome. This type of comparison will be seen again. This relationship between Roman and Spanish martyrs is a major component of the collection and must be considered carefully.

The hymn to Lawrence is interesting not only because of its relationship with *Pe.* 5, but also because of its location in the *Peristephanon*. *Pe.* 2 is the only hymn written for a Roman martyr before *Pe.* 11, identified by Roberts as the *itinerarium* to the holy city. This may suggest that there was a first edition of the collection ending before the addition of the *itinerarium* poems beginning with *Pe.* 9. There is of course no way of knowing with certainty that the manuscript forms of the *Peristephanon* are preserved in their proper order in the first place. *Pe.* 2. does not appear to share many of the qualities found in *Pe.* 9, 11, 12, and 14. It is for this reason that Roberts largely ignores this hymn, mentioning it only once in passing.<sup>419</sup> Prudentius seems to be dealing with something different in these two poems. Although the shrine of the martyr is mentioned, much more attention is given to the dialogue between the martyr and his persecutor. In this way, *Pe.* 2 and 5 resemble martyr *Acta* in which the trial is given greater weight than the death itself. This helps account for their longer length as compared with the later hymns.

*Pe.* 2 begins with the poet directly addressing the personified city of Rome:  
“Rome, Ancient parent of temples, given now to Christ, led by Lawrence to victory and triumph over barbarous worship.” *Antiqua fanorum parens, / iam Roma Christo dedita, /*

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<sup>419</sup> Roberts, 68.

*Laurentio victrix duce / ritum triumphas barbarum.*<sup>420</sup> Prudentius applauds Rome for its conversion, but recognizes that all of its history of glorious conquest failed to gain for Rome what Lawrence gained for it through martyrdom:

This glory alone was lacking for the honors of the toga-clad city, that with ferocious gentiles captured, it might subdue unclean Jupiter, not with the turbulent strength of Cossus, Camillus or Caesar, but by the martyr Lawrence.

*Haec sola derat gloria / urbis togatae insignibus, feritate capta gentium / domaret ut spurcum Iovem, / non turbulentis viribus / Cossi, Camilli, Caesaris, / sed martyris Laurentii.*<sup>421</sup>

This is a bold statement, which catapults the prestige of Lawrence's martyr cult above the well-known achievements of Constantine—the Caesar who actually was responsible for Rome's conversion. It is a powerful declaration of Prudentius' intention. He is writing to show Rome that the foundations of its famous history mean little in respect to Christianity. The poem then shifts its attention to the prefect of the poem who serves as Lawrence's primary pagan antagonist. The heavy criticism of pagan Rome continues with this prefect: "A prefect of the regal city, a minister of an insane leader, an exactor of gold and blood," *praefectus urbi regiae, / minister insani ducis, / exactor auri et sanguis.*<sup>422</sup> Rome is portrayed in the most sinister light possible, immediately after the process of empire building is questioned.

The description of Lawrence is in stark contrast to that of his pagan adversary. He is described as a "Levite of highest rank," *Levita sublimis gradu.*<sup>423</sup> This demonstrates a level of ascetic devotion, which explains the trusted role placed upon him. In this poem he is in charge of "governing the treasury of the heavenly house with keys of faith,"

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<sup>420</sup> Prudentius, "Peristephanon," II.1-4.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, II.9-15.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, II. 46-48.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, II. 39.

*caelestis Arcanum domus / fidis gubernans clavibus.*<sup>424</sup> A confrontation between these two characters seems inevitable. An arrest follows Lawrence's refusal to open the treasury to the prefect. Lawrence eventually agrees to provide the prefect with the riches he so desperately needs. For three days, Lawrence runs around the city collecting a crowd of beggars and the infirm. The prefect considers this payment an insult, but Lawrence replies with a carefully composed speech on corruption associated with gold: "Modesty is dissolved by gold, integrity is violated by gold, peace is killed, faith perishes and law itself collapses. Why do you exalt the poison of glory and why do you consider it great?" *Pudor per aurum solvitur, / violatur auro integritas, / pax occidit, fides perit, / leges et ipsae intercidunt. / Quid tu venenum gloriae / extollis et magni putas?*<sup>425</sup> This is only part of a longer speech but it nevertheless emphasizes two important points. First, modesty is introduced here as a crucial theme in the *Peristephon*. It will be referenced again at other key points in the narrative. The lust for gold is also emphasized here as the epitome of *luxus*, the fatal quality recognized by the ancient historians as a symbol of Rome's decline. Lawrence emphasizes that this is the "poison of glory," the only quality that Rome respected more than wealth.

Lawrence finishes the speech by offering the "jewels of flashing light," *gemmas corusci luminis*, that Christianity values most: "You see the sacred virgins, you marvel at old women, intact after the loss of the first husband, having known no second fire," *Cernis sacratas virgines, / miraris intactas anus / primique post damnum tori / ignis secundi nescias.*<sup>426</sup> Lawrence considers these women to be the church's crown jewel:

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<sup>424</sup> "Peristephanon," II.42-43.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 197-202.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid., II.299; 301-304.

“This is the church’s necklace,” *hoc est monile ecclesiae*.<sup>427</sup> The modesty of these women needs to be paraded like a crown: “Thus she adorns her high head,” *sic ornat altum verticem*.<sup>428</sup> Lawrence offers this quality as a contrast to the “poison,” *venenum*, which is robbing Rome of its glory: “Behold the talents, take them. You will adorn the city of Romulus and you will enrich the emperor’s estate...” *Eccum talenta, suscipe. / ornabis urbem Romulam, / ditabis et rem principis...*<sup>429</sup> The talents here refer to the women mentioned above. It is clear at this point that *pudor* is a quality that pagan Rome is sorely lacking. Lawrence sees this as the biggest threat to Roman society.

The prefect naturally interprets this gesture as a mockery of his previous arrangement with Lawrence. Lawrence is tortured and finally burned alive on a large pyre. But a miraculous event happens instead. Lawrence’s flesh does not burn, but instead cooks like bread giving off the smell of nectar. Lawrence jests with his tormentors that his flesh is fully cooked and ready to be eaten. This scene is a well-known aspect of the martyrdom, no doubt drawn from the Ambrosian hymn that it seeks to emulate. Prudentius adds to this by giving Lawrence one final prayer to God on behalf of Rome: “May Romulus become faithful, may Numa himself believe,” *Fiat fidelis Romulus, / et ipse iam credit Numa*.<sup>430</sup> Lawrence literally begs for God to rewrite Roman history. This task is fundamental to a poet who writes to give Roman Christians a meaningful past. After Lawrence’s death, Prudentius describes a rapid change in which all of the old temples are abandoned for the shrines of Rome’s martyrs: “The lights of the senate themselves, those of the Luperci or Flamens, prostrate themselves before the

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<sup>427</sup> “Peristephanon,” II.307.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*, II.308.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*, II.309-311.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, II.443-444.

thresholds of the apostles and martyrs,” *Ipsa et senatus lumina, / quondam luperci aut flamines, / apostolorum et martyrum / exosculantur limina.*<sup>431</sup> Lawrence has thus accomplished his task and the city of Rome is now liberated from dangerous pagan practices.

The martyrdom of the deacon Vincent in *Pe. 5* has a number of interesting parallels with *Pe. 2*. Vincent is also described as a “Levite,” *Levita*, in the poem.<sup>432</sup> His execution over a fire is portrayed in an almost cannibalistic fashion as well, a pyre on which “crackles shaken salt,” *scintllat excussus salis*, and “pressed down lard moistens,” *arvina ...inpressa...lavit.*<sup>433</sup> The smell of sweet nectar rises from the smoke just as it did with Lawrence.<sup>434</sup> These parallels are carefully designed to remind the reader of Lawrence’s passion in order to force the reader to look for other comparisons. In *Pe. 5*, Prudentius returns to the subject of Rome as an imperial power. Vincent offers the reader a different perspective from Lawrence. Whereas Lawrence was martyred in the imperial city, Vincent fought against imperial authority as a Roman subject from a Spanish province. Vincent’s debate with the governor of his province parallels Lawrence’s fight with the city’s prefect, but with one added element. The notion of authority and where it ultimately derives from is much more prevalent in *Pe. 5*. Examining this debate on authority in *Pe. 5* reveals more about the relationship between these two poems.

Vincent is brought into the conflict because of his refusal to worship before pagan idols. The governor Datianus attempts to persuade Vincent to do so by threatening with all the authority of a Roman governor: “The greatest King of the world, who bears the

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<sup>431</sup> “Peristephanon,” II. 519-520.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, V.30.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, V.226; 229-30.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, V.280.



Romulean scepter, decrees everyone to serve the ancient cults of the gods,” *Rex, inquit, orbis maximus, / qui scepra gestat Romula, / servire sanxit Omnia / priscis deorum cultibus.*<sup>435</sup> Presumably, this is the kind of reaction one would expect from a governor attempting to enforce the Roman imperial cult in a remote province. Vincent refuses to serve what he considers to be hollow idols with no authority of their own: “You let these powers command, let you worship stones and wood, let you be the dead priest of dead gods,” *tibi ista praesint numina, / tu saxa, tu lignum colas, / tu mortuorum mortuus / fias deorum pontifex.*<sup>436</sup> This dispute over idols is more than a religious matter. The statues of deified emperors filled every Roman town. To deny their authority was to deny the foundations of Roman authority itself. Vincent follows this denial with a statement attesting to the authority of his one, true god: “We shall confess the father, the author of light, and Christ his son, who is the one and true God, Datianus,” *nos lucis auctorem Patrem eiusque Chistem Filium, qui solus ac verus Deus, Datiane, confitebimur.*<sup>437</sup> The association between author and authority is key here. The author of all creation is naturally above anyone or anything claiming earthly authority.

Datianus does not accept this response and immediately threatens Vincent with execution. His basis for doing so is once again related to political authority just as much as religious difference: “Do you dare, unhappy man, he said, to violate this right of gods and emperors, this sacred and public right to which the human race yields,” *Audesne, non felix, ait, ius hoc deorum et principum violare verbis asperis, ius et sacratum et publicum, cui cedit humanum genus.*<sup>438</sup> Datianus sees this *ius* as a fundamental law governing all

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<sup>435</sup> “Peristephanon,” V.21-24.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*, V.33-6.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, V.37-40.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, V.42-46.

Roman society. To violate this is to disrespect Rome itself. The political dimension of imperial cult worship was not unknown to other Christian authors. It was a fundamental aspect of the persecutions in the first place. Prudentius nevertheless emphasizes this here more than in other hymns. Vincent is the first local hero he is dealing with in his poetry. It is therefore necessary to have him take a strong stance against Rome and emphasize the universal nature of Christian worship. This is an idea expressed in Lawrence's hymn as well. Lawrence revamps the Roman empire, making it a conduit for spreading the universal faith. Vincent chooses to elevate this universal faith over a faulty, antiquated system. In both accounts there is a clear criticism of the pagan Roman world with the understanding that something better can emerge from it.

Evidence present in both of these poems gives a possible range of dates for their composition. Palmer notes that a reference to a specific Roman law to preserve pagan works of art issued by Theodosius in 382 C.E. establishes the date for *Pe. 2.* at somewhere between 382 and 393 C.E.<sup>439</sup> Prudentius takes special care in *Pe. 2* to emphasize to his audience that pagan works of art are now cleansed from their pagan associations: "Then indeed will her marbles shine and her bronze will stand harmless, which now are held as idols," *tunc pura ab omni sanguine / tandem nitebunt Marmora, / stabunt et aera innoxia, / quae nunc habebuntur idola.*<sup>440</sup> This contrasts sharply with Vincent's position on the false idols of Rome. The dating of these two poems becomes more concrete if one dates *Pe. 5* slightly earlier than *Pe. 2*. This suggests that the hymn to Vincent precedes Theodosius' law in 382, while Lawrence is written shortly after that law became known throughout the provinces. The Lawrence hymn can thus be

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<sup>439</sup> Palmer, 260.

<sup>440</sup> "Peristephanon," II.481-84.

interpreted as a result of Prudentius' changing position on imperial politics based on the rise of the great Christian emperor Theodosius.

Dating these earlier poems to around 382 C.E. puts them roughly twenty years ahead of the final poems in the collection. Prudentius' *Contra Symmachum* is the most reliable measure for his chronology. According to Palmer, Prudentius mentions the Battle of Pollentia, occurring on the Easter of 402 C.E., in the *Contra Symmachum* but with no mention of subsequent Battle of Verona in 403.<sup>441</sup> Many of the poems considered part of Prudentius' *itinerarium* to Rome can be dated after this due to evidence that Prudentius' journey occurred around or after the production of the *Contra Symmachum* in 402/403 C.E. The evidence for this will be examined in greater detail below. It should be pointed out that as the name implies, the *Contra Symmachum* is a poem directed as a scathing response to Quintus Aurelius Symmachus concerning his letter to the emperor in defense of the Vestal Virgins and the Altar of Victory. This debate would seem a bit dated by 402 C.E., as the original correspondence between Ambrose, Symmachus and the emperor Valentinian II dates to around 384 C.E. It is possible that Prudentius only became aware of the debate upon visiting the city of Rome and decided to compose the poem as his own response. Symmachus probably died in 402 C.E., making a direct address to the statesman unlikely. He nevertheless was a symbol of the pagan revival in Rome so anything addressed to him would reach the ears of his followers and supporters.

#### THE TONGUE OF PRUDENTIUS

If *Pe.* 2 and 5 represent the earliest examples of Prudentius' lyrical endeavors, it is reasonable to assume that later hymns would continue to develop many of the themes

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<sup>441</sup> Palmer 17, fn. 35.

introduced in these two poems. *Pe.* 10 is in many ways the most problematic of all the hymns of the *Peristephanon*. Palmer considers it to be a spurious addition to the collection: “*Pe.* 10 hardly fits in with the scope and purpose of the shorter poems of the collection and may in fact not have been originally intended to form a part of it.”<sup>442</sup> Robert Levine considers the problem presented in *Pe.* 10 to be rooted in scholarly distaste over Prudentius’ convoluted mixing of genres coupled with his grotesquely overdramatic rhetoric.<sup>443</sup> An examination of prosody is not a great help here either. Levine points out that the poem’s iambic trimeter follows that of a Senecan tragedy but also matches that of a Plautan comedy.<sup>444</sup> The placement of *Pe.* 10 between two key parts of the *itinerarium* to Rome (featured in *Pe.* 9 and 11) also appears problematic. At no point is locale ever discussed in this massive hymn’s eleven hundred and forty lines. There is no cultic site for Romanus as there is for Vincent or Lawrence or the other martyrs in the collection. *Pe.* 10 nevertheless serves an important purpose in the *Peristephanon*. An examination of the content of this hymn will reveal *why* Prudentius temporarily halts his journey in the middle of his *itinerarium*.

Martha Malmud’s analysis of Cyprian mentioned above serves as only one of the many examples of Prudentius’ emphasis on wordplay using the names of the martyrs. Prudentius’ use of the name Romanus can serve as another example of this proclivity for wordplay. Although the historical martyr Romanus is mentioned by Eusebius as an eastern martyr from Caesarea, Prudentius makes no mention of Caesarea in *Pe.* 10.<sup>445</sup> Prudentius’ Romanus is a blank slate. It is possible that the name Romanus is another

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<sup>442</sup> Palmer, 248.

<sup>443</sup> Robert Levine, “Prudentius’ Romanus: The Rhetorician as Hero, Martyr, Satirist and Saint,” *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Winter 1991): 7.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>445</sup> Palmer, 248.

example of Prudentius' word play as it is literally the only information provided about this particular martyr. Without an obvious place in the Roman world, Romanus can simply be a *Romanus*—a Roman man representative of a changing Roman world. At eleven hundred and forty lines, this poem is nearly double the length of the collection's second longest poem. This is because it details a lengthy rhetorical battle between martyr and persecutor. Prudentius grants Lawrence and Vincent similar rhetorical skills, but amplifies many of their speeches into much larger and longer diatribes. Whereas Lawrence speaks out against traditional Roman religion, Romanus lectures about the follies of the pagan gods for more than three hundred lines.<sup>446</sup> *Pe.* 10 can thus be seen as a culmination of these ideas introduced in *Pe.* 2 and *Pe.* 5. It is not without a sense of irony that Prudentius chooses to make Romanus his mouthpiece. Romanus was tortured by having his tongue torn out. Miraculously, he continued to speak out against paganism even after this traumatic event.

*Pe.* 10 begins, as so many martyr tales do, with the arrest of its protagonist. The prefect Asclepiades ordered the invasion and destruction of Christian churches. Romanus, described simply as “a hero of sharp excellence,” *acris heros excellentiae*, warns his persecuted fellow Christians to harden themselves against the prefect's efforts.<sup>447</sup> Once Asclepiades realizes that Romanus is a key component of the opposition he has him arrested to make an example of him. His persecutors quickly recognize that Romanus is “a noble of long descent,” *vetusta nobilem prosapia*.<sup>448</sup> This qualifies him for special treatment according to Roman law. He is exempt from the rack and torture is only conducted through beating. Romanus protests this distinction: “Let it be absent that the

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<sup>446</sup> “Peristephanon X,” 97-398.

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

blood of my parents or the law of the curia makes me noble. It is the generous teachings of Christ which ennoble men,” *Absit ut me nobilem / sanguis parentum praestet aut lex curiae: / generosa Christi secta nobilitat viros.*<sup>449</sup> This is an interesting statement coming from a noble author writing to a highly learned, noble audience. This is only the first of a long list of grievances Romanus conveys to his captors about the ills of Roman society.

Romanus’ first speech focuses on the improprieties of the old gods. All of the mythical crimes of Zeus, Hera, Athena along with many others from the Greek pantheon are catalogued and elaborated upon. The issue of a lack of modesty, originally brought up by Lawrence, is reexamined in this scathing speech. Zeus is castigated as the “rapist swan,” *Cygnus stuprator.*<sup>450</sup> Aphrodite is chastised for the whoring performed in her name: “And does the brothel of the holy Cypris [Venus] not rouse you,” *nec te lupanar Cypridis sanctae movet?*<sup>451</sup> Romanus does not stop with his attacks against mythology. These false gods teach their immodesty to the people through their artistic portrayals. The idols themselves are steeped in impurity, which the myths convey: “Indeed what truth lies in the emblems themselves, formed with vestiges of their lewdness in bronze,” *quid quod sub ipsis veritas signis patet, formata in aere criminum vestigiis?*<sup>452</sup> Statues of Ceres depict her girt in black clothes, mourning her stolen virgin daughter. Romanus demands to know why she carries a torch in her hand: “Why if none of the gods had ravished the virgin, whose mother wanders seeking her till morning,” *Cur, si deorum nemo rapuit virginem, quem nocte quaerens mater errat pervigil?*<sup>453</sup> He concludes his attack on greek divinities by denouncing the fauns and nymphs who fill every corner of nature with

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<sup>449</sup> “Peristephanon X,” 123-25.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.*, 231-2.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, 237-38.

improper sexual mores.<sup>454</sup> Vincent attacks the idols; Lawrence attacks the religion.

Romanus combines these ideas to direct an attack against the idolater himself. He even implicates the artwork in the crime.

Romanus eventually directs his discourse to his own Christianity. He expounds upon God as the “author of light” first mentioned in *Pe. 2*:

God eternal, a thing incomprehensible, is not shut down by thinking or seeing, he exceeds every manner of human thought, and he is not able to be comprehended by sight... he himself is true light and the author of true light...

*Deus perennis, res inaestimabilis, / non cogitando, non videndo clauditur, / excedit omnem mentis humanae modum / nec comprehendi visibus nostris valet... / lux ipse vera, veri et auctor luminis...*<sup>455</sup>

This description of the incomprehensible nature of God serves to highlight the folly of worshipping a stone or bronze image. These idols depict mortals caught in morally questionable moments. They have nothing to do with the divine. The only temple which Romanus recognizes is one that occurs naturally—man himself: “A temple he has establish for himself in the soul of man,” *Aedem sibi ipse mente in hominis condidit*.<sup>456</sup>

This temple is difficult to reach but God nevertheless provides man with a special, distinguished guardian to protect his sacred trust. Romanus identifies this guardian as a virgin known as “Faith,” *Virgo custodit Fides*.<sup>457</sup> Faith, personified here, is the fundamental virtue of every Christian. Romanus elaborates on her qualities: “A bearing of modesty, a heart of innocence, a quiet peace, and chaste of body,” *Frontis pudorem, cordis innocentiam, / pacis quietem, castitatem corporis...*<sup>458</sup> The issue of modesty is

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<sup>454</sup> “Peristephanon X,” 241-45.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, 311-318.

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, 356-7.

once again paramount. It is what distinguishes paganism and Christianity first and foremost in Prudentius' poetry.

Asclepiades finally hears enough and proceeds to have Romanus scourged with whips down until his "breast whitens with his bones," *pectus albet ossibus*.<sup>459</sup> This torture does not effectively silence Romanus, who continues to question Roman materialism. The body of the martyr becomes the subject of the debate. Romanus jokes with his torturers about the relativity of pain. A doctor can cause just as much pain by healing as the executioner can by beating.<sup>460</sup> He then likens his impending martyrdom to surgery of the soul: "These men appear to seize my wasting limbs, but they are giving healing to those things living within," *Videntur isti carpere artus tabidos, / sed dant medellam rebus intus vividis*.<sup>461</sup> Romanus wishes to emphasize that his spiritual needs are far more important than physical ones. He then criticizes his persecutors for being so consumed by worldly affairs: "And who does not know how great the corruption is of contaminated and dissolvable flesh," *Quis nescit autem quanta corruptela sit / contaminatae carnis ac solibus*?<sup>462</sup> Romanus now focuses on the epitome of Roman corruption—the lust for wealth: "Is hoarded gold not gathered for the flesh," *Aurum regestum nonne carni adquiritur*?<sup>463</sup> If this is the foundation of Roman worldly existence, then Romanus wants no part of it: "I beg you, executioner, heal such ills, cut, tear the fomentor of sin," *Medere, quaeso, carnifex, tantis malis, / concide, carpe, fomitem*

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<sup>459</sup> "Peristephanon X," 455.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, 491-502.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*, 504-5.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid.*, 506-7.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*, 511.



*peccaminum*.<sup>464</sup> The criticism of gold and wealth harkens back to Lawrence's criticisms as well.

The torturers eventually grow tired of attempting to afflict Romanus with physical discomfort. In an effort to shake his faith, a small Christian boy and his mother are singled out for torture. This break in the debate between Romanus and Asclepiades offers the reader insight into the nature of martyrdom. Before the boy is brought out for torture, Asclepiades is confident that a small child would never accept Romanus' nonsensical point of view. Romanus responds to this by explaining to Asclepiades exactly what he thinks of martyrdom:

That cross is ours, we climb upon the yoke, For us Christ died and For us Christ returned a God, he who dying is man, his nature is double: he died and dominated over death, and returns to that which that cannot die.

*Crux illa nostra est, nos patibulum ascendimus, / nobis peremptus christus et nobis Deus / Christus reversus, ipse qui moriens homo est, natura duplex: moritur et mortem domat, / reditque in illud quod perire nesciat.*<sup>465</sup>

Prudentus uses his mouthpiece Romanus to explain martyrdom to his audience. It is the imitation of Christ's sacrifice, which allows the Christian to conquer death and thus no longer be weighed down with worldly concerns. The boy eventually undergoes his own martyrdom. Much to the surprise of Asclepiades, Romanus and the boy's mother rejoice at a glorious act, which has turned Roman society on its head. His mother joyfully wishes him farewell: "Goodbye sweetest one, she said, when blessed you have entered the realm of Christ, Remember your mother, now my patron from my son," *Vale, ait dulcissime, / cum beatus regna Christi intraveris, / memento matris, iam patrone ex filio.*<sup>466</sup> This boy

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid., 516-7.

<sup>465</sup> "Peristephanon X," 833-5.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid.

is described as a student of Romanus. Asclepiades uses the boy to test the words of Romanus with actions. The boy resists and receives his martyr's crown for his efforts.

The time finally arrives for Romanus' execution. Asclepiades wants to have him burned on a pyre, in the same way Vincent and Lawrence were executed. Romanus knows that he will suffer a different fate and says so:

"I know," he said, "that I am not about to be cremated, this is not the type of passion appointed to me"... this having been raised by him, an immense crash followed with rushing clouds, and headlong rainstorm extinguished the fires with a black river of water.

*"Scio," inquit ille, "non futurum ut concremer, nec passionis hoc genus datum est mihi"...haec eius orsa sequitur immensus fragor nubis ruentis, nimbus undatim nigro praeceps aquarum flumine ignes obruit.*<sup>467</sup>

This prediction enrages Asclepiades, who decides that the only way to stop Romanus is to tear his tongue from his mouth. A surgeon named Aristo is appointed to the task, but Romanus miraculously retains his speech. While Asclepiades marvels at his inability to silence this one man, Romanus launches into yet another discourse on the perversity of pagan religion. He now focuses his attention on the eastern cult of Magna Mater and her priesthood: "Both sexes are displeasing to this holy one... the happy mother of the gods prepares unbearded ministers for herself with a quick razor," *Uterque sexus sanctitati displicet... /felix deorum mater inberbes sibi / parat ministros levibus novaculis.*<sup>468</sup> This is a well-placed jab at a priesthood known for castrating its devotees. Prudentius' criticism of the eastern cult may be an attempt to distinguish Christianity from other foreign mystery cults in the eyes of a more traditional audience.

Asclepiades finally attempts another execution. Since cutting and tearing have been ineffective tools, Asclepiades decides to have the breath strangled out of Romanus:

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<sup>467</sup> "Peristephanon X," 853-55; 857-8.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

“The restless voice does not know to shut up its garrulous speech other than if I break its horn,” *Aliter silere nescit oris garruli / vox inquieta, quam tubam si fregero*.<sup>469</sup> This martyrdom is prefigured at the beginning of the torture scene, when Asclepiades directs his attack at speech itself: “I wish to torture the words themselves as he is speaking,” *ipsa et loquentis verba toqueri volo*.<sup>470</sup> Although Romanus is executed successfully this time, Asclepiades has failed to destroy the breath or *spiritus* of the martyr. With its earthly bounds dissolved, Romanus’ soul is able to rise above worldly forms of torture: “His soul freed from its chains sought heaven,” *anima absoluta vinculis caelum petit*.<sup>471</sup> The persecutor thus fails even when he succeeds. This happens because Asclepiades is unable to overcome a pagan mindset that cannot see the world for what it is.

This emphasis on dialogue and spoken word throughout the lengthy hymn contrasts sharply with the poem’s ending. In this rare moment, Prudentius discusses the historical veracity of the written sources for this martyrdom: “It is said that the prefect intimated everything he did with the emperor, adding an order of volumes and distributing the details of so great tragedy,” *gesta intimasse cuncta fertur principi / praefactus addens ordinem voluminum / seriemque tantae digerens tragoediae*.<sup>472</sup> This implies that Prudentius is relating the events of a well-documented martyrdom. Prudentius then explains that this is not the case: “But these the long passage of time wipes away, they are darkened with soot, swallowed up by dust in their resting place, old age shreds them or buries them under ruins,” *illas sed aetas conficit diutina, / fuligo*

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<sup>469</sup> “Peristephanon X,” 1104-1105.

<sup>470</sup> *Ibid.*, 555.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 1110.

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*, 1111-13.

*fuscata, pulvis obducit situ, / carpit senectus aut ruinis obruit.*<sup>473</sup> The story is preserved instead by a spiritual register. God keeps account of “the words of his discourse,” *verba...dissentis*, and also “paints his wounds with a stylus,” *pingens vulnera...stylo.*<sup>474</sup> This ending fits his theme, which places more emphasis on the eternal “breath,” *spiritus*, of the martyr outliving the base, worldly paper on which it is recorded. It also seems to be a tacit admission that the events of this passion are not particularly well known to Prudentius beyond a few basic details. The fact that such a long and marvelous hymn is produced, demonstrates that Prudentius is willing to embellish and even fabricate key events in order to convey his message.

Establishing a concrete date for *Pe.10* is even more difficult than it is in the case of *Pe. 2* and *Pe. 5*. There is no connection to a physical locale and no evidence for a pilgrimage to a particular site. It has already been suggested that the content of Romanus’ disputes are developed from the arguments present in *Pe. 2* and *Pe. 5*. This would naturally require a date for *Pe. 10* after the composition of these two poems. Prudentius’ *Contra Symmachum* builds off of this content as well. Michael Roberts notes that in the second book of the *Contra Symmachum*, Prudentius invokes a personified *Roma* to respond to Symmachus directly concerning the condition of Christian Rome. Roberts considers this a direct attack on Symmachus’ personification of *Roma* in the *Relatio* of 384.<sup>475</sup> This personification can also be seen as a further evolution of Romanus, who serves as the mouthpiece of the everyday Roman citizen. Prudentius has *Roma* use the

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<sup>473</sup> Ibid., 1116-18.

<sup>474</sup> “Peristephanon X,” 1123-24.

<sup>475</sup> Michael Roberts, “Rome Personified, Rome Epitomized: Representations of Rome in the Poetry of the Early Fifth Century,” *American Journal of Philology* Vol.122, No. 4 (2001): 538.

aforementioned Battle of Pollentia as an example of Christian Rome's ability to triumph over its enemies.

This is why the date for the *Contra Symmachum* is considered a fixed point. By 410, the Goths had sacked Rome, thus negating *Roma's* argument. *Roma* echoes many of the criticisms of material existence found in *Pe. 5* and *Pe. 10*: "Bronzes <statues> fall down, yellow gold flows away, silver loses its shine if it ceases to be used, the vein metal, blacked from sitting, corrupts its color..." *aura cadunt aut fluvium defluit aurum / aut candor perit argenti di defuit usus, / et fuscata situ corrumpit vena colorem...*<sup>476</sup> *Fuscata situ* is particularly reminiscent of the scrolls blacked from disuse at the end of *Pe. 10*. However, a new more positive element is present in *Roma's* discourse: "For you, emperor, living glory is owed, a living prize of your virtue, <you> having followed immortal glory," *viva, tibi, princeps, debetur Gloria, vivum / virtutis pretium decus inmortale secuto.*<sup>477</sup> Theodosius is the addressee. It therefore stands to reason that Theodosius has already enacted legislation banning much of the pagan practice so heavily criticized by Prudentius in *Pe. 2, 5, and 10*. The *Contra Symmachum* is intended to convince the recently converted rather than win over new converts. Remnants of paganism are still present in the upper echelons of Roman society, but now Prudentius finds himself in the position to defend a new Christian empire, rather than criticize the old pagan one.

## THE JOURNEY TO ROME

Michael Roberts considers the connection between *Pe. 9, 11 and 12* to be crucial to any interpretation of the *Peristephanon* as a whole. He notes that most of the early

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<sup>476</sup> "Contra Symmachum," II, 753-5.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid., 756-7.

poems follow a “tripartite” pattern: “The bulk of each poem is taken up with the martyr narrative proper, but an introduction and conclusion locate the saint’s shine in the spiritual geography of late antiquity and give details of his or her cult.”<sup>478</sup> Although this pattern is established early on in the *Peristephanon*, *Pe.* 9, 11 and 12 take the connection between locale and passion to an entirely new level. The author himself is drawn into the story to the point that “narrator and devotee are most completely fused.”<sup>479</sup> These three poems make up an *itinerarium* or pilgrimage to the city of Rome. Prudentius presumably took this journey shortly after the year 402 C.E. Roberts is correct in noting the special connection between these three; however, his understanding of how they fit into the rest of the collection could use some revision.

Roberts describes these three poems as a “triad” in which *Pe.* 10 is “clearly intrusive.”<sup>480</sup> If one considers the Romanus of *Pe.* 10 to be a near personification of the city of Rome, then the placement of this hymn at this point in the collection makes more sense. *Pe.* 9 takes place at the shrine of the martyr Cassian at Imola in Northern Italy. The poem introduces the audience to the city of Rome at the end by indicating that the poet continued his journey after finishing his prayer to Cassian, “I was heard, I visited the city and witnessed [everything] in proper succession, I return home,” *Audior, urbem adeo , dextris successibus utor: / domum revertor.*<sup>481</sup> This is the point in the collection when *Pe.* 10 interrupts Roberts’ “triad.” It has already been stated that no locale or holy shrine is ever mentioned in *Pe.* 10. It is easily the poem furthest in form from Roberts’ criteria for an *itinerarium* poem. This poem nevertheless summarizes many of Prudentius’ previous

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<sup>478</sup> Roberts, 131.

<sup>479</sup> Roberts, 132.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>481</sup> “Peristephanon,” IX, 105-6.

criticisms of Rome. It is perhaps important for the poet to revisit these themes before “entering” the famous city for the first time. This helps the reader distinguish the pagan Rome vilified in the earlier hymns, from the Christian city described in the later hymns.

Roberts is nevertheless justified for recognizing a jarring disjunction in the transition from *Pe. 9* to *Pe. 10* and then again from *Pe. 10* to *Pe. 11*. Each of the *itinerarium* poems draws the reader into a visual universe very different from the personification of speech found in *Pe. 10*. Prudentius does not recount the martyrdom of Cassius; he witnesses it himself. At this shrine in Imola, he sees the story captured in vivid detail in an apse painting: “I raised my face to heaven, there stood opposite my view the image of a martyr painted in color, carrying one thousand wounds, lacerated through all his limbs, and enduring his skin ruptured minute punctures,” *Erexi ad caelum faciem, stetit obvia contra / fucis colorum picta imago martyris / palagas mille gerens, totus lacerata per artus, ruptam minutis praeferens punctis cutem.*<sup>482</sup> The martyr is Cassian, a local teacher. After arresting him for scorning the imperial cult, the local governor sentences Cassian to torture and execution at the hands of his pupils. These children were allowed to strike the martyr with their styluses until he bled out from a thousand, tiny wounds.

Although this hymn is small and seemingly insignificant next to the greater subject matter of the hymns that follow it, the fusion of the act of martyrdom and the act of writing is particularly striking. The students emphasize this point while mocking Cassian: “Behold we are giving back to you many thousands of characters,” *Reddimus ecce tibi tam milia multa notarum.*<sup>483</sup> Cassian the martyr has become the first *tabellum* on

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<sup>482</sup> “Peristephanon,” IX, 9-12.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, 71.

which his own passion is written. Roberts notes the unique “collapse” between reading and seeing in this hymn:

Subsequent versions of the martyr narrative, whether written, spoken or depicted reproduced the original martyr text that is the saint’s lacerated flesh. Written/spoken texts share the immediacy, the sense of presence and subversion of distinction between time of reading and time of martyrdom normally associated with the visual.<sup>484</sup>

This provides Prudentius with another valid reason for placing *Pe.10* before the next *itinerarium* poem. Romanus is a further blending between text and martyrdom. Whereas Cassian becomes the object upon which the passion is written, Romanus is literally transformed into the lofty speech (i.e. *spiritus*) that he delivers throughout the poem.

Prudentius enters the city of Rome in *Pe. 11*. He begins the hymn by marveling at the innumerable martyr shrines and epitaphs found throughout the city:

You ask about the individual names incised on the epitaphs of the tombs, but it is with difficulty that I am able to repeat them. So many multitudes of the just did impious fury devour, when Trojan Rome worshipped its ancestral gods.

*Incisos tumulis titulos et singula quaeris / nomina: difficile est ut replicare queam. / Tantos iustorum populos furor inpius hausit, / cum coleret patrios troia Roma deos.*<sup>485</sup>

This is the first encounter Prudentius has with the *elogia* of Damasus. Prudentius’ early work may be reflective of Ambrose’s influence, but his late work is characterized by Damasus’ influence. Prudentius appears to be genuinely impressed with how the city of Rome honors its martyrs. Many of the sites he describes were without a doubt the product of Damasus’ building program from a generation before.

Hippolytus, the subject of *Pe. 11*, is also featured in one of Damasus’ *elogia*. Prudentius shows his knowledge of this *elogium* in his own account. Hippolytus’ turn

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<sup>484</sup> Roberts, 145.

<sup>485</sup> “Peristephanon,” XI, 3-6.



from the schism of Novatus is the subject of Damasus' poem. Prudentius has Hippolytus give a speech about his involvement in the schism: "Flee, Oh wretched souls, from the accursed schism of Novatus, return to the catholic fold. Let one faith be strong, the one that was established by the early church, which Paul and the chair of Peter retain."

*Fugite, o miseri, execranda Novati / scismata, catholicis reddite vos populis. / Una fides vigeat, prisco quae condita templo est, / quam Paulus retinet quamque cathedra Petri.*<sup>486</sup>

With this statement, Prudentius echoes Hippolytus' repentance in Damasus' account while paying respect to the apostolic authority referenced in the *elogium* to Peter and Paul as well. This connection to the *cathedra Petri* becomes even more apparent in *Pe.* 12.

Prudentius is not the type of author to shy away from adding detail to an account. The conflation of classical and Christian figures, and the outright merger of two distinct martyr accounts into a single, new story are just some of the many flights of fancy enjoyed by this poet. Besides an eight-line *elogium*, no details of Hippolytus' martyrdom survive. Prudentius uses this opportunity to craft a passion built around a pun on his name. He takes the name Hippolytus, being linked to the Greek word ἵππος, "horse," and combines it with the divisive controversy surrounding the figure. Prudentius' Hippolytus is thus executed by quartering, with four horses literally tearing him to pieces. Prudentius recounts this death scene in a similar fashion to Cassian's: "Painted above the tomb, thrives a likeness with flowing shadows, portraying the bloody members of man dragged along," *Picta super tumulum species liquidis viget umbris / effigians tracti membra cruenta viri.*<sup>487</sup> This detail emerges after Prudentius finishes recounting the martyrdom.

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<sup>486</sup> "Peristephanon," XI, 29-32.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-26.

The reader is therefore unaware that he has just listened to the description of a painting. The merger of passion and poem is even closer.

Prudentius continues his hymn after describing the painting of the martyrdom in order to describe Hippolytus' subterranean shrine. It is here that Prudentius breaks the fourth wall, showing genuine admiration for Damasus' accomplishments with Rome's martyr cults: "The august city expels and pours out its citizens, as one the plebeian phalanx and patrician mingle together with shoulders together and like ambition, with faith preceding distinction of rank," *Urbs augusta suos vomit effunditque Quirites, / una et patricos ambitione pari / confundit plebeia phalanx umbonibus aequis / discrimen procerum praecipitante fide.*<sup>488</sup> Roberts considers this sentiment to illustrate the inclusive nature of a newly formed Christian society:

Prudentius' poem to Hippolytus has something of the nature of a charter for the Christian *civitas*, viewed vertically as hierarchically organized under God, but more particularly horizontally, as an undifferentiated community that transcends conventional social divisions of rank or geographical boundaries... and is conceived of as one with the martyr in an all-enveloping mutual embrace.<sup>489</sup>

This reveals the intent behind the poems of the *Peristephanon*. Prudentius wants the martyr cults of Spain to mimic those of Damasus' Rome. Rome is once again the heart of a new Christian empire. It is Prudentius' purpose to rebuild the provincial martyr cults in this new mold.

Prudentius guides his audience up from Hippolytus' underground shrine and into the city itself. He has several distinguished sites to choose from in *Pe*. 12 because he now turns his attention to the apostles Peter and Paul—two of Rome's most famous martyrs. The fact that he chooses to cover such lofty figures in just one poem is significant by

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<sup>488</sup> "Peristephanon," XI, 199-202.

<sup>489</sup> Roberts, 164.

itself. Roberts notes that Rome traditionally celebrated these martyrs with a single, common feast day. Although he recognizes some dispute over the traditional dating over their deaths, he considers the major writers of the time to accept the same month and day, if not the same year, for their executions.<sup>490</sup> Damasus produced his *elogium* to cultivate the unity between these two figures: “You find the names of Peter and Paul together,” *Nomina quisque Petri partier Paulique requires*.<sup>491</sup> Prudentius finds this notion of unity agreeable and produces his sole account, even though the locations of their cult sites provided ample material for extending his *itinerarium*.

Damasus takes these foreign saints and makes them into local heroes: “The East sent the disciples we willingly admit it... Rome rather has earned the right to defend them as her own citizens,” *Discipulos Oriens misit, quod sponte fatemur... Roma suos potius meruit defendere cives*.<sup>492</sup> Prudentius builds off his own account around this idea. The river Tiber, a quintessential symbol of Rome becomes the fulcrum that binds the two apostles together: “The Tiberine swamp, which is washed by the nearby river, knows [it is] dedicated as the site of two victories, a witness to cross and sword,” *Scit tiberina palus, quae flumine lambitur propinquo, / binis dicatum caespitem tropaeis, / et cruces et gladii testis*.<sup>493</sup> Only a small portion of the poem is dedicated to a narrative of the martyrdom—a segment of roughly twenty lines. There is no lofty dialogue, just the basic facts about the martyrs’ deaths. Prudentius concludes by emphasizing the locations of their executions: “Sacred Tiber divides the bones of [these] two on either bank, while it flows between [their] sacred tombs,” *Dividit ossa duum Tybris sacer ex utraque ripa, /*

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<sup>490</sup> Roberts, 169.

<sup>491</sup> Damasus, “Carmen IX,” *PLL* 13.

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid.*,” 3.7.

<sup>493</sup> “Peristephanon,” XII, 7-8.

*inter sacrata dum fluit sepulcra.*<sup>494</sup> The river becomes sacred because it passes through two sacred sites. The association between Peter and Paul and Romulus and Remus would be obvious to any reader steeped in Roman myth. The Tiber, the foundation of Rome itself, is rooted to these two foundational Christian figures. They nourish the city with tales of their death in the same way Romulus and Remus nourished it with tales of their legendary birth.

The poem now returns to its present task of guiding the reader to Rome's holiest sites. Roberts finds Prudentius' first choice in this matter puzzling:

The first surprise in reading this passage is that Prudentius chooses to describe not the magnificent Constantinian basilica...but a baptistery and a channeling of water that made it possible, the work, we know from a pair of inscriptions (3 and 4 Ferrua), of Pope Damasus.<sup>495</sup>

The baptistery of Saint Peter described in *Pe.* 12 is built around a sacred spring near the Tiberine site of Peter's death. Prudentius is impressed by the architect's ability to link the building to the natural setting of its spring. He indulges in colorful descriptions of the verdant baptismal basin reflecting the glorious painting above it: "A multi-colored picture holds its glass waves, mosses reflect and its gold becomes green and its deep blue fluid draws a resemblance to the overhanging purple," *omnicolor vitreas pictura superne tinguunt undas, / musci relucent et virescent aurum / cyaneusque latex umbram trahit imminentis ostris.*<sup>496</sup> All of this colorful speech is used to draw the reader's attention to the *pictura*: "The shepherd himself nourishes his sheep there in the icy coolness of the spring, those whom he sees thirst for the rivers of Christ," *pastor oves alit ipse illic gelidi*

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<sup>494</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>495</sup> Roberts, 174.

<sup>496</sup> "Peristephanon," XII, 39-41.

*rigore fontis, / videt sitire quas fluenta Christi.*<sup>497</sup> This pastoral scene links the site of the martyr with the Roman clergy. This nameless priest uses the sacred waters of Peter's shrine in the act of baptism. The pastor thus directly appropriates the holiness of the martyr gained through his proximity to the shrine.

This idea is particularly appealing to Prudentius as a visitor to the holy city. It is a testament to the impact of Damasus' building program at Rome. His beautification of the city extended beyond the production of *elogia*. His real achievement was the construction of a sacred city, which helped bolster the authority of the Roman clergy. Scholars tend to lose sight of this because the buildings do not survive. *Pe.* 12 demonstrates the impact of Damasus' accomplishment just twenty years after his death. Prudentius ends his poem by paying homage to Damasus' successor, the "sleepless priest" who hurries to both cultic sites in order to preside over their sacred rites: "First across the Tiber the sleepless priest performs the sacred rites, soon he hurries back and duplicates the prayers," *transiberina prius solvit sacra pervigil sacerdos, / mox huc recurrit duplicatque vota.*<sup>498</sup> Prudentius leaves Rome's holy days under the firm control of its clergy, who are as essential to the festival as the martyrs themselves. The Roman priest is a true *pontifex*—a bridge builder linking the competing cultic sites on opposite sides of the Tiber. He then tells the reader to remember this and bring it back home: "When you have returned home, remember to practice this two-fold festival as it is here," *Tu domum reversus / diem bifestum sic colas memento.*<sup>499</sup> Prudentius reveals with this statement that he wants the Roman world to respect and follow the customs of the Roman church. The *Peristephanon* is more than an attempt to mimic Roman martyr cults. It is designed to extend the practices of the church

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<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>498</sup> "Peristephanon," XII, 63-64.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

of Rome to the provinces of the larger Christian empire and to show them how to honor their local martyrs properly.

#### REPLICATING THE VIRGIN MARTYR

Roberts sees *Pe.* 12 as the final destination in Prudentius' *itinerarium* to Rome. Prudentius inexplicably turns to the North African martyr Cyprian of Carthage in *Pe.* 13, leading the reader to believe that the statement, "When you have returned home," *Tu domum reversus*, at the end of *Pe.* 12 indicates the finality of Prudentius' journey through the eternal city. But the final hymn to Agnes is set in Rome as well. A small cue at the beginning of the poem indicates that Prudentius was familiar with Constantia's church to Agnes, restored by Damasus after the schismatic disputes of the 360s C.E: "There is a tomb for Agnes in the home of Romulus," *Agnes sepulcrum est Romulea in domo*.<sup>500</sup> This statement is the only evidence for Agnes' tomb, leaving scant information about Agnes' cultic site. *Pe.* 14 is almost as disconnected from its locale as *Pe.* 10. It is no wonder that Roberts considers this final Roman hymn to be problematic to his thesis, which emphasizes the relationship between a martyr's *passio* and locale. Agnes nevertheless serves as an important final destination for Prudentius. Agnes is the quintessential Roman martyr. Her popularity in the city is well attested, and her treatment by Damasus and Ambrose indicates that she was an essential part of a newly emerging martyr narrative. Prudentius chooses to conclude his collection with Agnes for this reason. His treatment of the martyr is nevertheless confusing.

This confusion stems from Prudentius' sources. *Pe.* 14 appears to follow Ambrose's account of Agnes in *De virginibus* more closely than Damasus' *elogium* or

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<sup>500</sup> "Peristephanon XIV," 1.

the Ambrosian hymn to Agnes. If these two latter sources were so influential to the *Peristephanon* as a whole—as this chapter maintains—then why are they seemingly ignored in this final hymn? John Petruccione offers an intriguing answer to this problem. Petruccione considers *Pe.* 3 to be another retelling of Agnes’ martyrdom written to complement *Pe.* 14.<sup>501</sup> Prudentius composes his third hymn to honor Eulalia, the virgin martyr of Merida. Petruccione and Palmer both note an absence of source material on Eulalia before Prudentius’ account.<sup>502</sup> It has already been demonstrated with several of the hymns above that historicity was not this poet’s primary goal. Petruccione considers the conflation of Agnes and Eulalia to be a product of Prudentius’ Hispano-Roman civic pride: “The poet, proud Hispano-Roman that he was, wished to claim for his homeland a virgin martyr as great as Agnes of Rome. He, therefore, transferred to Eulalia material that clustered about Saint Agnes.”<sup>503</sup> This statement is reminiscent of Palmer’s thesis, which claims that Prudentius sought local counterparts to famous Roman martyrs.

This idea is essentially correct, but there is something else behind Prudentius’ intent. Most of the poetry covered thus far has been highly critical of the Roman imperial cult. This criticism seems like an obvious topic for hagiography to cover because so many martyrs died for refusing to sacrifice. Prudentius knows this but takes the debates between martyr and persecutor already present in every martyr text one step further. The imperial cult, developed under Augustus, was used to Romanize the wider world. Each Roman provincial town was built to mirror the capital, introducing a civic lifestyle to a formerly uncivilized world. The cult was an essential component in this endeavor.

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<sup>501</sup> John Petruccione, “The Portrait of Eulalia of Merida in Prudentius’ *Peristephanon* 3,” *Analecta Bollandiana* Vol. 108 (1990): 81-104.

<sup>502</sup> Palmer, 239; Petruccione, 85.

<sup>503</sup> Petruccione, 85-6.

Prudentius' poetry seeks to co-opt this function for Prudentius' new Christian empire. The martyrs take the place of gods and heroes and even deified emperors. This is Prudentius' reason for composing these hymns. Over the course of fourteen poems, he is detailing a transition from the outdated "Trojan" Rome denigrated by Lawrence, Vincent and Romanus to the new Christian Rome now fully realized thanks to the efforts of Damasus. An examination of the relationship between *Pe. 3* and *Pe. 14* will help illustrate this point.

In order to produce two unique hymns from what is essentially the same body of source material, Prudentius constructs his hymn to Eulalia primarily from Damasus' *elogium* and Ambrose's hymn. The connection between the Ambrosian hymn and the *elogium* has already been explored and does not need to be elaborated upon here. The primary detail to be considered here is the nature of the martyr's death. Agnes dies by fire in the *elogium* and in the Ambrosian hymn; she dies by decapitation in *De virginibus*. Whereas Prudentius uses execution by sword in *Pe. 14*, he focuses on sources dealing with Agnes' execution by fire in *Pe. 3*. Prudentius does not make this distinction haphazardly. Death by flame is a key motif in *Pe. 3*. It alludes to the significance of the martyr's death and helps the reader understand Prudentius' entire enterprise.

Prudentius begins this fire motif in his introduction to Eulalia at the beginning of the poem: "When on the crackling pyre, her hardness terrified her executioners, her torture [is] established a pleasure to her," *Cum crepitante pyra trepidos / terruit aspera carnifices, / supplicium sibi dulce rata.*<sup>504</sup> Prudentius uses the *crepitante pyra* to foreshadow her fiery execution at the end of the poem: "The crackling flames fly onto her face, and invigorated by her hair, it seizes her head and surpass its top," *flamma crepans*

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<sup>504</sup> "Peristephanon," III, 13-5.



*volat in faciem / perque comas vegetata caput / occupat exsuperatque apicem.*<sup>505</sup>

According to Palmer, *crepitante* and *crepans* are part of a Virgilian “reminiscence” carefully chosen to link Eulalia to Lavinia from book seven of the *Aeneid*: “And near her father, the Virgin Lavinia stood, a fire appeared to envelop her long locks, and all adorned she appeared to be burned by the crackling flame,” *Et iuxta genitorem astat Lavinia virgo, visa longis comprehendere crinibus ignem / atque omnem ornatum flamma crepitante cremari.*<sup>506</sup> This passage from the *Aeneid* is part of a larger portent, indicating Lavinia’s destined role as wife to Aeneas and *matrona* to Rome’s future. Palmer indicates the importance of drawing such a comparison between Lavinia and Eulalia:

Although the flame of Eulalia’s pyre consumes in a way that the Virgilian flames do not, this flame and the death which it brings constitute victory for Christianity in the future in a more real and lasting sense than that contained in the *Aeneid*’s prophecies for the future greatness of Rome.<sup>507</sup>

Prudentius thus employs Virgilian vocabulary in order to force the learned reader to draw parallels between Eulalia and Lavinia. This Virgilian reference is only one of many. *Pe. 3* has more overt references to Virgil than any other poem in the collection.<sup>508</sup>

There is a strong connection between the Christian martyr and classical hero in the *Pe. 3*. Although Palmer recognizes similar usage in *Pe. 2* and *Pe. 5*, she considers the expression of heroic poetry to be at its height in the Eulalia hymn.<sup>509</sup> She notes that the phrase *decus egregium*, or “distinguished honor,” is applied to Eulalia’s martyrdom at the introduction of the hymn in order to elicit a comparison with the hero Turnus from

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<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*, 156-58.

<sup>506</sup> G.P. Goold, ed., *Aeneid*, VII, 72-74, *LCL* 64.

<sup>507</sup> Palmer, 171.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*,

book seven of *Aeneid*.<sup>510</sup> Other Virgilian terms that are applied to Turnus abound throughout the hymn, emphasizing Eulalia's *nobilitas*.<sup>511</sup> The female warrior Camilla provides another Virgilian prototype for Prudentius. Eulalia rejects "girlish" items as a child just as Virgil's Camilla: "She would scorn amber, ignore roses, refuse golden necklaces, with a severe face and modest step, with excessively tender manners, she imitated grey old age," *spernere sucina, flare rosas, / fulva monilia respuere, / ore severa, modesta gradu, / moribus et nimium teneris*.<sup>512</sup> Palmer notes the similarity between this line and a description of Camilla in *Aeneid* 7: "This warrior woman of Minerva, whose womanly hands were not accustomed to vessel or basket, but as a hardened virgin she endured battles..." *Bellatrix, non illa colo calathisve Minervae, / femineas adsueta manus, sed proelia virgo / dura pati...*<sup>513</sup> This association is particularly important for it shares features with Agnes in *Pe.* 14 as well.

In the *Aeneid*, Virgil wishes to emphasize traditional Roman *mores* whenever possible. *Pius Aeneas* is steadfast in his devotion to family along with the household gods. Prudentius adopts some of these Virgilian references to familial piety, but he does so in order to address the young female martyr's apparent rejection of her family. Palmer points to a connection between *pia cura parentis*, "the pious care of her parent," in *Pe.* 3 and the initial description of Iulus in the first book of the *Aeneid*. Ascanius also has *omnis... cura parens*, or "all the attention of his parent," but the *parens* here is his father Aeneas.<sup>514</sup> The *parentis* described in *Pe.* 3 is not a member of Eulalia's earthly family. It is God, Eulalia's heavenly father. This recalls Eulalia's attention to *Patris ad solium*, or

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<sup>510</sup> Palmer, 155; *decus egregium* found in "Peristephanon" III, 8, *Aeneid* 7, 473.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>512</sup> "Peristephanon, III, 21-24."

<sup>513</sup> *Aeneid*, 7, 805-7; Palmer, 157.

<sup>514</sup> *Aeneid* 1, 36-7; Palmer, 158.

“the throne of her Father,” referenced earlier in the poem.<sup>515</sup> This family connection is made to address the natural difficulty a Roman aristocratic audience would have with a young woman rejecting her parents for ascetic devotion. Ambrose was preoccupied with this issue in *De virginibus*. This perhaps accounts for one of the key discrepancies between Damasus’ *elogium* and *De virginibus*. In the *elogium*, Damasus relates a tale of martyrdom “related by holy parents,” *Sanctos dudum retulisse parentes*.<sup>516</sup> Ambrose’s account suggests a negative relationship with the martyr and her parents: “But girls of this age are not even able to bear the stern faces of their parents.” *At istius aetatis puellae torvos etiam vultus parentem ferre non possunt*.<sup>517</sup> Prudentius reconciles this ambiguous relationship by introducing a new holy parent to replace the earthly ones in the narrative.

Although traces of Ambrosian influence can be felt in *Pe. 3*, Eululia’s narrative imitates Damasus’ *elogium* more closely than *De virginibus*. *Decus egregium* may reference Turnus in the *Aeneid*, but the quotation cannot be credited to Prudentius alone. Damasus uses a similar designation in his *elogium* to Agnes, where the young martyr is described as *decus alma pudoris*, or “holy glory to chastity.”<sup>518</sup> The entire enterprise of using Virgilian verse to glorify the heroic actions of Rome’s martyrs begins with Damasus’ *elogia*. Prudentius embraces this idea like no other, writing mock epics on Christian virtue alongside lyric martyr ballads replete with Virgilian reminiscences. Prudentius’ poetry is proof that Rome still needed to find itself in this new Christian world. Prudentius and Damasus give their audience a Christian past relatable to the classical poetry taught to every Roman child fortunate enough to receive an education.

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<sup>515</sup>“Peristephanon, III, 17.”

<sup>516</sup> Damasus, “Carmen XXIX,” 1.

<sup>517</sup> Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” I.2.7.

<sup>518</sup> Damasus, “Carmen XXIX,” 9.

There are other similarities to the *elogium* that have already been mentioned. The precociousness of Eulalia's youth mentioned above resembles Damasus' Agnes, who "from the lap of her nurse, suddenly ceases to be a girl," *Nutricis gremium subito liquisse puellam*.<sup>519</sup> The mysterious nature of her "holy parents," *Sanctos Parentes* is also elaborated upon.<sup>520</sup> Eulalia's execution provides even more evidence for linking these two poems together. Damasus has the long flowing hair of Agnes obscure the view of her naked body from her torturers: "And gave her profuse hair to cover her nude limbs / So that no mortal face might see the temple of the lord," *Nudaque perfusos crines, et membra dedisse, / Ne domini templum facies peritura videret*.<sup>521</sup> Prudentius reproduces this scene with Eulalia in *Pe*. 3: "Her fragrant locks had flowed down enveloping her shoulders, in order that her blushing chastity and virginal honor might be hidden, protected by the covering of her head," *Crinis odor ut in iugulos / fluxerat involitans umeris, / quo pudibunda pudicitia / virgineusque lateret honos, / tegmine verticis opposito*.<sup>522</sup> The scene now develops into her execution by fire.

By lowering her head to preserve her modesty, Eulalia's hair falls into the flames of her pyre. These are the "crackling flames," *crepitans flammam* mentioned by Palmer as a reference to Lavinia in the *Aeneid*. These flames "fly into her face," *volat in faciem* and "seize her head," *caput occupant*, leading to a portent similar to the one present in *Aeneid* 7. After the fire, "invigorated by her hair," *comas vegetata*, covers her entire head, Eulalia attempts to breath the fire into her lungs in order to hasten her martyrdom. At this moment, a miraculous event occurs: "From there a dove shinier than snow, crawling from

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<sup>519</sup> Damasus, "Carmen XXIX," 3.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>522</sup> "Peristephanon," III, 151-155.

the mouth of the martyr launches out, [it was] seen to abandon [the earth] and chase the stars,” *Emicat inde columba repens / martyris os nive candidior / visa relinquere et astra sequi*.<sup>523</sup> The executioners flee in terror at the sight of this and Eulalia’s holy parent provides protection for her now unguarded modesty: “Behold an icy storm pours down snow and covers the entire forum, while it covers the limbs of Eulalia lying under the cold heavens, just like a linen shroud,” *Ecce nivem glacialis hiems / ingerit et tegit omne forum, membra tegit simul Eulaliae axe iacentia sub gelido pallioli vice linteoli*.<sup>524</sup> Petruccione compares the *flammas* of Eulalia’s execution to the *flammeus*, a bright orange-red wedding gown which traditionally covered the Roman bride from head to foot.<sup>525</sup> Eulalia’s “marriage” foretells the coming of Christian Rome just as Lavinia’s foretells the coming of pagan or “Trojan” Rome, as Prudentius would call it.

Eulalia’s desire to protect her modesty by lowering her head is the only element common to all of the sources examined so far. It is clearly important in *Pe. 3*. Its significance to Agnes in *Pe. 14* must be considered as well. In *Pe. 14*, Prudentius embraces *De virginibus* as his chief source for the details of his narrative. This is not meant to suggest that it was his only source. Many of the Damasan elements seen in *Pe. 3* repeat themselves with greater emphasis in *Pe. 14*. Agnes is also characterized as an epic hero by means of classical reference. An important event preceding Agnes’ execution will help illustrate the relationship between these two sources.

Prudentius begins his hymn by identifying the popular origins of the Agnes story. There is no clear authority identified as the author. Prudentius begins with “they say,” *aiunt*. This is reminiscent of Damasus’ *elogium* which identifies *rumor* as its chief

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<sup>523</sup> “Peristephanon,” III, 176-180.

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-63.

<sup>525</sup> Petruccione, 100.

source, *rumor refert*.<sup>526</sup> The written sources make it clear that some of the meager details surrounding the Agnes martyrdom developed naturally by word of mouth. This situation is ideal for an author like Prudentius. He has multiple sources at his disposal that he can combine and transform to create his own version of events. He does so by taking the virgin of Antioch from *De virginibus* and adding it to the Agnes narrative. Agnes is still arrested for refusing to sacrifice at a pagan altar but now her punishment is reminiscent of this other nameless martyr. Prudentius' Agnes becomes an object of lust : "It is necessary to drag this girl into a public brothel, if she does not apply her head to the altar and ask the forgiveness of Minerva now, the virgin whom she persists in scorning as a virgin," *Hanc in lupanar trudere publicum / certum est, ad aram ni caput applicat / ac de Minerva iam veniam rogat, / quam virgo pergit temnere virginem*.<sup>527</sup> An entirely new element has now been added to the Agnes narrative. The addition of Minerva as a wronged virgin goddess is noteworthy. In addition to providing some poetic irony, it brings the struggle between pagan and Christian forms of feminine virtue into the debate.

Martha Malmud considers the inclusion of this brothel scene to be a particularly important reference to early Roman history. Prudentius is in Rome after all as the introduction to the poem clearly states: "The tomb of Agnes is in the Romulean home," *Agnes sepulchra est in Romulea in domo*.<sup>528</sup> According to Malmud, this reference to Romulus at the beginning of the poem is used to signify more than just location. Prudentius wants the reader to interpret Agnes as a reimagined Rhea Silvia. Tradition splits the mother of the twins Romulus and Remus into two different figures: Rhea Silvia (the virgin) and the she-wolf (*lupa* also meaning prostitute according to Livy). Malmud

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<sup>526</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>527</sup> "Peristephanon," XIV, 25-28.

<sup>528</sup> Ibid., 1.

sees Agnes as another doubled female figure who can serve as both virgin and whore due to the inclusion of this brothel episode: “The same doubling occurs in Prudentius’ poem, for Agnes, the untouched virgin, is forced to assume the role of a prostitute, making her, etymologically, both a virginal whore and a sheep (*agnus*) in wolf’s clothing.”<sup>529</sup> This interpretation fits with the portrayal of Eulalia as a reimagined Lavinia. Once again, Prudentius rewrites Christian heroes as classical Roman myths. Once again, the virgin martyr is tied with the foundation of the city.

Prudentius introduces this element from *De virginibus* but chooses to conclude the episode differently. Agnes is drawn into the forum, but does not make it to a brothel. At this point in the hymn, the details are not clear, but the reader is led to believe that Agnes has been stripped and put on display based on the crowd’s reaction to her current situation: “While she was standing there the crowd turned away in sadness, their faces averted, so that no one would insolently look upon the feared place,” *Stantem refugit maesta frequentia, / aversa vultus, ne petulantius / quisquam verendum conspiceret locum.*<sup>530</sup> Yet one man did dare to do so, much to his own detriment: “By chance one man focused his face shamelessly on the holy girl and to look upon her form with a lewd eye,” *Intendit unus forte procaciter / os in puellam nec trepidat sacram / spectare formam lumine lubrico.*<sup>531</sup> This impudent gaze is punished when “a bolt of fire,” *ignis fulminis*, shoots out in his direction, rendering the man “blind from the flashing light, *caecus corusco lumine.*<sup>532</sup> This punishment plays on the power behind gaze. The man is caught gazing upon the form of the holy girl, and he is punished by having his ability to

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<sup>529</sup> Malmud, 157.

<sup>530</sup> “Peristephanon,” XIV, 40-2.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-5.

<sup>532</sup> *Ibid.*, XIV, 46-48.

gaze removed. It is a dramatic reversal of the *De virginibus* account which describes the virgin with her neck bent and her gaze fixed submissively on the ground: “She stood, she prayed and she bent her neck,” *Stetit, oravit, cervicem inflexit.*<sup>533</sup> It grants the martyr a power not applicable to the Ambrosian account. The *forma* of this Agnes is “to be feared,” *verendum*.

Agnes’ persecutors become frustrated by their failed attempts to sway her. Her death is ordered in the name of the emperor and a young executioner approaches her with his “naked sword,” *mucrone nudo.*<sup>534</sup> Agnes meets her impending death with defiance:

I rejoice that such a man as this comes, an insane, ferocious, wild man of arms rather than a soft and sluggish weak boy, covered in perfume, who would destroy me with the end of my modesty,

*Exulto talis quod potius venit / vesanus, atrox, turbidus armiger, / quam si venire languidus ac tener / mollisque ephebus tinctus aromate, / qui me pudoris funere perderet.*<sup>535</sup>

Agnes embraces death as vehemently as a bride embracing her marriage bed. The connection between chaste martyrdom and marriage to Christ, first alluded to in *Pe. 3* is once again revisited. Agnes intensifies it here, likening the act of execution to sexual penetration:

I shall receive all the iron into my breast and I shall draw the strength of the sword into the innermost depths of my chest. Thus married to Christ, I shall cross over the heavens and all its shadows, higher than the ether.

*Ferrum in papillas omne recepero / pectusque ad imum vim gladii traham / sic nupta Christo transiliam poli / omnes tenebras aethere celsior.*<sup>536</sup>

The act of execution thus becomes one of consummation. Death by sword brings marriage to Christ. But death is not the only condition that must be met. Agnes must

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<sup>533</sup> Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” I.2.9.

<sup>534</sup> “Peristephanon,” XIV, 68.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-73.

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-80.



preserve her “modesty,” *pudoris*, at all cost. She craves death as a permanent solution to her threatened virginity. Paradoxically, Prudentius has her lust after it in a manner which seemingly lacks modesty.

Virginia Burrus notes a connection between Prudentius’ Agnes and the mythical account of Polyxena found in both Virgil and Ovid. In each account, the unhappy virgin embraces death as way to permanently preserve her virginity. Ovid offers a more detailed account in his *Metamorphoses* along with dialogue: “Do not delay! Thrust your spear into either my neck or breast! (She then uncovered both throat and chest) I, Polyxena, certainly do not wish to serve another.” *Nulla mora est: aut tu iugulo vel pectore telum conde meo! iugulumque simul pectusque retexit scilicet haud ulli servire Polyxena vellem!*<sup>537</sup> Burrus believes that by making this connection to Polyxena, Prudentius reinforces the “sexualized subjugation” of Agnes to a male audience: “The Christian Agnes must be wrenched back into her womanly place. She is not after all audacious virago but docile virgo.”<sup>538</sup> There can be no doubt that Prudentius develops his account from Ambrose’s *De virginibus* in an effort to exemplify the feminine virtues espoused by the bishop of Milan. Burrus is therefore somewhat justified in her claim. Yet Prudentius offers the reader something else with this defiant speech. Prudentius’ Agnes is not just a passive agent bending her neck obediently to a male executioner. She is a woman who proudly stares death in the face and embraces it passionately.

The death itself lacks the dramatic impact of Eulalia’s execution by fire. It happens with the swift stroke of a sword and barely commands the reader’s attention at all. In this instance, Prudentius follows Ambrose’s *De virginibus* very closely: “Having

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<sup>537</sup> G.P. Goold, ed., Ovid, “Metamorphoses,” 13.458-60. *LCL* 43.

<sup>538</sup> Virginia Burrus, “Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring 1995): 42.

spoken thus, with her head falling she prayed to Christ as a supplicant, so that the impending wound slice through her bent neck more easily,” *Sic fata Christum vertice cernuo / supplex adorat, vulnus ut inminens / cervix subiret prona paratius*.<sup>539</sup> Burrus considers this submissive death to be a distasteful end to such a powerful female figure. She identifies the attacking of the throat with feminine, submissive forms of execution found in classical literature.<sup>540</sup> She does not understand why Prudentius deprives her of the proud death she demanded just a moment earlier: “He silently substitutes a submissively bent neck for the breast Agnes has defiantly offered, thereby compromising even Agnes’ power to claim full complicity in her death-marriage, now still more clearly inscribed as rape.”<sup>541</sup>

It is important to remember that Agnes’ speech adds an element of defiance not present in *De virginibus*. Ambrose only supplies a defiant speech for Agnes in his hymn *Agnes Beatae Virginis*. This suggests that Prudentius follows this particular account more closely than the earlier one in *De virginibus*. The addition of this speech changes the nature of her execution. Agnes now bends her neck for Christ not the executioner. Her act is therefore one of defiance rather than submission.

Martha Malmud offers another understanding of Agnes’ execution by sword. Death by the sword is the death of a soldier, not that of a woman, who in classical literature was more likely to die by hanging or strangulation.<sup>542</sup> Malmud considers Agnes’ death to be a transition toward a masculine state: “The grammatical subject changes instantly from feminine Agnes to her masculine *spiritus*, and it is this masculine

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<sup>539</sup> “Peristephanon,” XIV, 85-87.

<sup>540</sup> Burrus, 40.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-9.

<sup>542</sup> Malmud, 171.

part of her that finally makes the transcendent leap to the stars.”<sup>543</sup> The idea of the female martyr *becoming* male actually originates with the third-century martyr Perpetua, who personally recounts a vision of her own transformation into a masculine gladiator in order to fight in the arena. The martyr / soldier motif was heavily employed by Christian authors, but it is still somewhat surprising to find it here. Agnes in *De virginibus* represents an effort to offer a proper feminine paragon to a growing female ascetic audience. Her modesty and virginity are more important qualities to Ambrose than bravery and defiance. Prudentius redefines Agnes as a female warrior who fights for her modesty with bravery and defiance. *Pe.* 14 is therefore more than just an attempt to emulate Ambrose. Prudentius crafts his own virgin martyr by employing qualities he appreciates from both Ambrose’s account and Damasus’ *elogium*.

#### A DOUBLE CROWN FOR THE VIRGIN MARTYR

There are a number of clues presented above which suggest that the story of Agnes has an elevated significance in the *Peristephanon*. She is the only martyr afforded two separate hymns. This demonstrates that Prudentius considered this martyrdom to be so influential that it needed its own Spanish counterpart in the form of Eulalia. The classical references in *Pe.*3 and *Pe.*14 are numerous. Prudentius considered this martyr to be as essential to the Christian literary tradition as Virgil’s characters were to the classical literary tradition. More importantly, the enormous influence of Agnes on early Christian Rome leads Prudentius to make comparisons with foundational figures, such as Lavinia and Rhea Silvia. But the most important reason has yet to be discussed. Prudentius chooses to conclude his lengthy collection with the martyr Agnes for a specific reason as

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<sup>543</sup> Malmud, 171.

well. Although Romanus serves as the mouthpiece or mind of this collection, Agnes remains its heart and soul. It is for this reason she earns a *duplex corona* or “double crown.” Agnes has obtained something unique as both a virgin and a martyr. Prudentius recognizes this and awards her accordingly.

The double crown was first mentioned by Ambrose, but oddly enough, he does not grant it to Agnes as a reward for her virginity and martyrdom. Ambrose awards the double crown for “modesty and religion,” *pudoris et religionis*.<sup>544</sup> Although the idea being presented here is similar, modesty and religion are the personality traits which bring about Agnes’ virginity and martyrdom. Ambrose therefore crowns his Agnes for the appropriateness of her personality rather than the action behind her sacrifice.

Prudentius on the other hand ties the *duplex corona* to the martyr’s actions: “A double crown is promised to the martyr: her virginal state preserved from every sin, and then the glory of her free [chosen] death.” *Duplex corona est praestita martyri: / intactum ab omni crimine virginal, / mortis deinde gloria liberae*.<sup>545</sup> Recognition of this double status makes Agnes a more powerful figure than the standard martyr in the *Peristephanon*. Her sacrifice is twofold, and thus her reward is multiplied even further: “Meanwhile God circles the brow of the unwed martyr with two crowns: one produces the reward of eternal light, issuing sixty fold, in the other is one hundred times the profit,” *Cingit coronis interea Deus / frontem duabus martyris innubae: / unam decemplex edita sexies / merces perenni lumine conficit / centenus extat fructus in altera*.<sup>546</sup> Prudentius uses this specific terminology to emphasize the greatness of her accomplishment.

Malmud sees Agnes’ *duplex corona* as the culmination of a theme referenced

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<sup>544</sup> Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” I.2.9

<sup>545</sup> “Peristephanon,” XIV, 7-9.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid., 119-123.

again and again throughout the *Peristephanon*. She notices multiple references throughout the entire poem that relate to binding and loosing:

The imagery of bondage which permeates the *Peristephanon*, a book abounding in knots, chains, ropes, snares and various forms of constraint and deceit, is balanced by the persistent image of binding and weaving as a metaphor for creation, just as the frequent images of dissolution, amputation, and dismemberment offset by more positive images of liberation and freedom.<sup>547</sup>

The duplex corona, or “double-twisted” crown as she chooses to translate it, is representative of this trend: “The persistent conflict between the contracting language of the text, which repeatedly confines and encloses Agnes, and her ostensible liberation from bondage through death is epitomized in the *duplex corona* she receives after death.”<sup>548</sup> Malmud sees Agnes as the ultimate example of a confined or constrained Christian finally freed with magnificent force after her martyrdom. Agnes therefore serves as Prudentius’ most complete *exemplum* of a martyr—one who sacrifices everything during both life and death.

This perhaps explains why the Agnes hymn is used to conclude the collection. Prudentius can stretch the martyr narrative no further. Agnes is his perfect martyr. Prudentius entreats her in the final lines of his poem, begging for her forgiveness: “I shall be purged by the brightness of your promising face, if you will fill my liver,” *Purgabor oris propitiabilis / fulgore, nostrum si iecur inpleas*.<sup>549</sup> Prudentius asks for the martyr to purge him from his unclean state. Agnes is not the only martyr Prudentius entreats at the end of a hymn, but she is the only one from whom he asks forgiveness. This conclusion is once again reminiscent of Damasus’ *elogium*. Both Damasus and Prudentius recognize the power of the virginal figure and pray for her intercession on their behalf. This further

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<sup>547</sup> Malmud, 175.

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>549</sup> “Peristephanon,” XIV, 130.

confirms the close connection Prudentius had when writing *Pe.14* as well as the *Peristephanon* as a whole. While at Rome, Prudentius saw something in the *elogia* worth imitating. The *Peristephanon* as a collection is proof of Damasus' influence on the evolving martyr tradition.

## CHAPTER 6: *GESTA AGNETIS*: MULTIPLYING THE FEMALE MARTYR NARRATIVE

The *Gesta Martyrum Romanorum*, a group of Roman martyr passions tentatively dated to the sixth century, represents the popular response to the episcopal promotion of virgin asceticism represented by Damasus, Ambrose and Prudentius. These works were not produced by an individual bishop or poet; they were the product of centuries of popular tradition merging with the authoritative new texts of the fourth century. While significant literary figures, like Prudentius, and significant theologians, like Ambrose, deferred to the authority of tradition in their fourth-century works, the anonymous authors of the *Gesta* deferred to the authoritative reputations of their bishops, crediting them with sermons and passions that they never actually produced. A close look at pseudepigraphal *Gesta Agnetis*, credited to Ambrose, and the *Sermo Agnetis*, credited to bishop Maximus of Turin will help illuminate how the popular traditions of the young martyr merged with the episcopal narrative of the fourth century to produce a unique *passio* that would be emulated for centuries.

In her seminal work on virgin asceticism, Kate Cooper considers the *Gesta Martyrum* to be the point of origin for the idealized female martyr: “The *Gesta* wove together narrative strands from the ancient Romances and the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles around historical personages who were partly or entirely imaginary.”<sup>550</sup> Cooper believes that this process of fabrication stems from the conflation of classical literary motifs with late antique hagiography. The end result transformed the female martyr from a holy figure into a passive agent: “This process of literary conflation and reuse had the effect of obscuring any distinction between the spiritual trials of the pre-Constantinian

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<sup>550</sup> Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 117.

martyrs and those of the aristocratic virgins of fifth-century Rome.”<sup>551</sup> The aristocratic women of the fourth and fifth century were still a powerful source of patronage for the Roman church. Cooper is correct in suggesting that the female martyr narrative was carefully adapted to obscure the traditional figures, who represented competition to church authority.

Cooper’s work is indispensable to the study of female hagiography. The fourth-century sources nevertheless suggest that this change in the narrative was already taking shape before the *Gesta* were written. A careful examination of *Gesta Agnetis* in comparison to the other accounts discussed above should help clarify the distinct contributions of all of the Agnes narrative’s many authors, including the unknown author of the *Gesta*. The *Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* without a doubt influenced western hagiography at this time, but this was only one strand of influence. The Agnes narrative, developed by Damasus, Ambrose and Prudentius, was heavily steeped in traditional Roman myth in addition to the Hellenistic Romance motif identified by Cooper. The fourth-century sources represent other, equally important influences on the development of female hagiography. A careful examination of the *Gesta Agnetis* as well as the *Passio Anastasiae* will shed light on this relationship. Although the Hellenistic influence on the female hagiography cannot be ignored, the *Gesta* and the medieval hagiographical works that followed it developed from a complex set of Christian and pagan sources from every part of the Mediterranean.

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<sup>551</sup> Cooper, 117.



## ASCETICISM AND THE *GESTA MARTYRUM ROMANORUM*

In a preface to a recent collection of essays on late antique religion, Kate Cooper acknowledges her indebtedness to the early twentieth century scholar Albert Dufourcq, for his detailed research on the *Gesta Martyrum Romanorum* in his *Études sur la Gesta Martyrum Romains*.<sup>552</sup> Dufourcq has been the only scholar to date, who attempted to look at the production of the *Gesta* in a systematic manner. Dufourcq operated under the assumption that this diverse collection of martyr *Passiones*, *Acta*, and *Gesta* were produced or at least redacted for one specific purpose. Dufourcq considers the highly literary production of the *Gesta* to be the last remnant of the Catholic polemic against Manichaeism: “Un Catholique aura trouvé l’ingénieux moyen de satisfaire à la fois sa piété à l’égard des martyrs et sa haine à l’endroit des hérétiques.”<sup>553</sup> The Manichaeans, who were also strict adherents of asceticism, competed with the popular martyr cults endorsed by orthodox bishops. By producing *Gesta* for public recitation during important feast days, church representatives could teach proper ascetic practice with the authoritative examples of popular local martyrs.

Cooper considers Dufourcq’s hypothesis to be impossible to support or deny because of the lack of any similar systematic treatment of the *Gesta* by modern scholars. She acknowledges that the *Gesta* strongly emphasize asceticism and virginity in particular:

It is entirely possible that the texts were designed to support the Catholic assertion of the value of the human body against Manichaean dualism by chronicling the

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<sup>552</sup> Kate Cooper and Julia Hillner, eds., *Religion, Dynasty and Patronage in Early Christian Rome* (Cambridge University Press, 2007): 12

<sup>553</sup> Albert Dufourcq, *Études sur la Gesta Martyrum Romains* (Rome: École Française de Rome et de Athènes, 1988): 343.

heroic suffering of the martyrs, while at the same time averting a Manichaean monopoly on ascetic value.<sup>554</sup>

Dufourcq's detailed survey of the *Gesta* remains the most thorough treatment of this important collection of fifth and sixth-century sources. The complexity, which he himself identified while grouping these various accounts together, nevertheless suggests that this collection of martyr texts was more than the product of one particular author or even one narrow group of authors.

Dufourcq understands that the *Gesta* were produced individually over the course of several centuries. His hypothesis hinges on the existence of the *Gesta* as a distinct collection, redacted by a sixth-century author opposed to Manichaeism and other forms of heresy. The idea of a common redactor for this collection of martyr passions is related to Dufourcq's association with the abbot and scholar Louis Duchesne. Duchesne considered the *Gesta Martyrum* to be a book of martyrs produced in association with the sixth-century *Liber Pontificalis*.<sup>555</sup> In a subsequent volume to *Études sur la Gesta Martyrum Romains* written seven years after the original, Dufourcq revises his hypothesis to include a fifth-century origin for a group of closely-related *gesta*, erroneously credited to Ambrose in the Bollandist *Acta Sanctorum*.<sup>556</sup> This influential group of texts served as the first wave of development, leading up to what Dufourcq calls the Ostrogothic texts of the fifth and sixth centuries.

This group, which he refers to as the pseudo-Ambrosian texts, were likely redacted as early as the papacy of Innocent I (401-417 C.E.). The group consists of martyrs from Ambrosian hymns, including Sebastian, Protasius and Gervasius, Agnes

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<sup>554</sup> Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 117.

<sup>555</sup> Dufourcq, *Études*, 15.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*

and Felix of Nola. Dufourcq considers the production of these texts to be an attempt to popularize Roman martyr cults over the much more popular African cults of the fourth century.<sup>557</sup> He attaches special significance to the Agnes *gesta*, which he considers to predate the rest of the collection: “Les plus anciens gestes d'un martyr romain nous semblent être, aujourd'hui, les gestes de sainte Agnès; il est très remarquable qu'ils se rattachent au groupe pseudo-ambrosien.”<sup>558</sup> The reason for Dufourcq's deviation from his original hypothesis stems from a reference to a particular priest named Leopardus in the *Liber Pontificalis*. In the *Liber*, Innocent has Leopardus oversee the construction of a church dedicated to Protasius and Gervasius under the behest of wealthy female patron named Vestina. Innocent appoints this same priest to oversee a renovation of the church of Sant' Agnese Via Nomentana. Dufourcq believes this close association to these two important cultic centers makes Leopardus (or someone very close to him) the most likely candidate for authorship of the pseudo-Ambrosian *gesta*.<sup>559</sup>

Dufourcq's subsequent volume about this early branch of the *Gesta*, which he dubs pseudo-Ambrosian, focuses on the *Acta Sebastiani*. According to Dufourcq, this particular *gesta* was produced by Salvian, a monk for the abbey at Lerins. Dufourcq uses this dubious connection to make the claim that all the pseudo-Ambrosian *gesta* of the fifth century were the product of or at least heavily influenced by this monastery.<sup>560</sup> In his comprehensive survey of the development of the Italian diocese in the fifth and sixth

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<sup>557</sup> Albert Dufourcq, *Études, vol.II*, 4. Dufourcq considers this late antique Latin literature of the third and fourth century to be a major influence on the fifth century *gesta*, “Selon toutes les vraisemblances, les martyrs d'Afrique étaient plus populaires que les martyrs d'Italie. Dès le iv siècle, l'église romaine fêtait les anniversaires de saint Cyprien et des saintes Félicité et Perpétue au XVIII des kalendes d'octobre et aux nones de mars.”

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>559</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-112.

century, Francesco Lanzoni reexamines Dufourcq's thesis and rejects it on linguistic grounds:

Ma sifatte [Dufourcq's] conclusioni, dedotte da confronti di lingua, di stile e di pensiero tra le *Gesta* e gli autori ecclesiastici del secolo v-vi, forse non sono molto solide; perchè gli scrittori di un tempo determinato e di un genere speciale sogliono presentare tra loro molti punti di contatto.<sup>561</sup>

Lanzoni demonstrates that it is impossible to narrow these works to a particular author based solely on stylistic observations. The monastic circles of the fourth and fifth centuries were interconnected and adopted a similar style and vocabulary, making the origins for the *Gesta* indeterminate. He nevertheless agrees with Dufourcq that *Gesta* were heavily influenced by the monastic communities of the western Mediterranean, particularly the ones in North Africa.<sup>562</sup>

Although Dufourcq's argument is compelling, his work is dated and a number of modern scholars have pointed out flaws in his methodology. Timothy David Barnes notes that Dufourcq's preference for the obviously fictitious *Acta Sebastiani* compromises his hypothesis on the *gesta*'s role in the development of the Roman cults of Peter and Paul.<sup>563</sup> Joan Petersen notes that Dufourcq builds many of his conclusions using sources that are no longer considered authentic: "Dufourcq's comparative method is as good as any, provided that one can be certain of the authenticity of the earlier narrative with which the comparison is made."<sup>564</sup> Dufourcq's preference for the third-century *Passio Mariani et Iacobi* over the more widely accepted *Passio Perpetuae* is particularly

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<sup>561</sup> Francesco Lanzoni, *Le Diocesi d'Italia dalle origini al secolo VII* (Studi e Testi 35): 41.

<sup>562</sup> Lanzoni, 41-2.

<sup>563</sup> Timothy David Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History* (Mohr Siebeck, 2010): 393.

<sup>564</sup> Joan Pettersen, *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great in their Late Antique Cultural Background* (Wetteren: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984): 59.

problematic.<sup>565</sup> Dufourcq's dated methods notwithstanding, his multi-volume work remains the only comprehensive study on the *gesta*. Many of his assertions hold up after some slight modification. Although *Mariani et Iacobi* is an insufficient substitute for the *Passio Perpetuae*, Dufourcq is correct in asserting the predominance of the African cults in Latin Christianity before the early fifth century.

Kate Cooper considers many of Dufourcq's insights to still be valuable, even though they need to be updated. She acknowledges that most of the early twentieth-century scholars of the *gesta*, including Dufourcq and Lanzoni, adopted an outdated model for understanding the relationship between the clergy and lay aristocracy.<sup>566</sup> She encourages the adoption of a more nuanced understanding of this complex relationship. In her mind, the topography of late antique Rome was more than "the competition between clergy and lay."<sup>567</sup> Rome consisted of "coalitions" of clergy and lay participants producing texts to serve their individual interests.<sup>568</sup> This understanding is confirmed by the struggles described by Jerome in his letters to his aristocratic supporters. Even the orthodox voices in Christianity were far from uniform at this point in time.

Using Cooper's model for the relationship between the Roman clergy and lay aristocracy, Hannah Jones specifically analyzes the *Gesta Agnetis* in order to examine how its themes might influence an aristocratic audience. Jones notes that this account of Agnes is dramatically different from the "eroticized" accounts of Ambrose and Prudentius: "The 'domestic' Agnes of the *Passio* [*Gesta*] perhaps reflects an attempt to

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<sup>565</sup> Pettersen, 60.

<sup>566</sup> Cooper and Hillner, eds., *Religion, Dynasty and Patronage*, 12. She includes a discussion of several noteworthy authors who examined the *Gesta* without the focus of Dufourcq and Lanzoni, including: Peter Llewellyn, "The Roman Clergy and the Laurentian Schism," *Ancient Society*, Vol. 8, 245-75; G.N. Verrando, "Osservazioni sulla collocazione cronologica degli apocrifi Atti di Pietri dello Pseudo-Lino," *Vetera Christianorum*, vol. 20: 391-426.

<sup>567</sup> Cooper and Hillner, eds., *Religion, Dynasty and Patronage*, 12.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

replace the ‘episcopal’ Agnes with a figure more in keeping with the interests of Roman lay patrons.”<sup>569</sup> Other additions to the story demonstrate this newfound emphasis on the domesticity of the martyr. The addition of Agnes’ parents as well as her royal patron Constantia to the narrative have the effect of emphasizing the familial connections to what was once the lone, ascetic figure of the martyr. Jones sees this as the account’s *raison d’etre*: “Stripping virginity of its anti-familial connotations, this episode seems to have appealed directly to the traditional Roman laity, embellishing Agnes’ cult site in a tale of familial continuity.”<sup>570</sup> If this is correct, the *Gesta Agnetis* represents the popular lay response to the ascetic model put forth by the “episcopal” figures of Damasus, Ambrose, and even Prudentius.

Jones’ thesis is compelling, but a closer examination of the earlier sources in relation to the *Gesta Agnetis* is still needed to help clarify their relationship. The relationship between the *Gesta Agnetis* and the rest of the *Gesta martyrum Romanorum* also needs to be determined. Jones’s notion of the *Gesta Agnetis* as a popular lay response to the previous sources is derived from Kate Cooper’s own work on the popular response to asceticism outlined in *The Virgin and the Bride*. Because Cooper’s original thesis hinges on the connection between *Passio Anastasiae* and the Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla, an examination of the relationship between the *Passio Anastasiae* and the *Gesta Agnetis* will be used to illustrate the relationship between the *Gesta Agnetis* and the rest of the collection as a whole.

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<sup>569</sup> Hannah Jones, “Agnes and Constantia: Domesticity and Cult Patronage in the Passion of Agnes,” in Cooper and Hillner, eds., *Religion, Dynasty and Patronage*, 124.

<sup>570</sup> Burrus, 133.

## THE *GESTA AGNETIS* AND THE ROMAN ARISTOCRACY

The *Gesta Agnetis* retains many of the details that have accumulated throughout the development of this narrative. The anonymous author describes the martyr as “young in age but old in spirit,” *corpore quidem iuvencula, sed animo cana*.<sup>571</sup> The extreme youth of the martyr is a key detail already established by Damasus and Ambrose.<sup>572</sup> The confrontation with a prefect and sentence to the *lupanar*, or “brothel,” is retained from the account in the *Peristephanon*. A miracle that preserves Agnes’ modesty by blinding a lustful voyeur is also similar to the account found in the *Peristephanon*. The persecutors execute Agnes with the sword after initially attempting to do so with fire. This execution is similar to the interplay between the two methods of execution found in the *Peristephanon* and the Ambrosian hymn. Many of the core narrative details remain the same, but some noteworthy new elements can also be found in this source.

The *Gesta* is a more descriptive source than the accounts of Damasus, Ambrose, and Prudentius, and, as a result, it adds significant details to the Agnes narrative not found in the fourth-century sources. Agnes’ relationship with her family is particularly significant. After the death of the martyr, her family builds a sepulcher in her honor and serves as the earliest support for her cult: “The parents of holy Agnes sitting in watch guarded her tomb.” *Igitur dum parentes sanctae Agneae assiduis pernoctationes vigilarent ad sepulcrum eius*.<sup>573</sup> This contrasts sharply with Ambrose’s *De virginibus* which implies that Agnes met with stern disapproval from her parents for resisting

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<sup>571</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae ex Ambrosianarum,” PLL, XVI, 1. 1.

<sup>572</sup> Damasus, “Carmen XXIX,” PLL, XIII. 1.3; Ambrosius, *De virginibus*, PLL, XVI.1.2.7

<sup>573</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” I.16., PLL 16.

marriage.<sup>574</sup> This shift in tone demonstrates an overall shift in theme from the ascetic Agnes of the Ambrosian accounts, to a domestic family-oriented exemplum in the *Gesta*.

The *Gesta*, like all of the other accounts composed after *De virginibus*, claims to be a sermon dedicated to the martyr's feast day. This testifies to the impact that the Ambrosian account had on subsequent sources. As a result, Ambrose is erroneously credited as the author of the *Gesta*. Several narrative details, which show a strong link to the *Peristephanon*, suggest that it was actually produced in the fifth century after the death of the famous bishop. Although the writing of pseudepigrapha in imitation of a famous author was common in the ancient world, this particular source exists to soften the strong ascetic message of the *De virginibus* and make it more palatable for an aristocratic audience, which may not support such a radical lifestyle for its daughters. The rejection of the suitor in the *Gesta* represents the rejection of worldly vanity, in favor of a spiritual marriage to Christ. This *sposa Christi* motif was not a new construct, but it was one that became significantly more popular in Rome during the fifth and sixth centuries.

The main narrative addition to the *Gesta* is the presence of a worldly counterpoint to Agnes' spiritual marriage to Christ. The prefect's son falls madly in love at the first sight of Agnes and pursues her relentlessly: "Hearing [this] the most unsound young man was struck blind with love and was twisted in spirit between the anguish of his mind and the desire of his body," *Audiens insanissimus iuuenis amore carpitur caeco et inter angustias animi et corporis anhelu cruciabatur spiritu*.<sup>575</sup> In order to win the favor of her and her family, the boy brought them rich rewards: "Then he brought with him very precious ornaments, which were refused, as if [it were] dung, by blessed Agnes,"

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<sup>574</sup> Ambrosius, "De virginibus," I.2.7.

<sup>575</sup> Ambrosius, "Epistolae," 1.4.



*Denique detulerat secum pretiosissima ornamenta, quae a beata Agne veluti quaedam stercora sunt recusata.*<sup>576</sup> Agnes taunts the prefect's son by praising the superior qualities of her "other" lover:

Depart from me, fomentor of sin, nurturer of wickedness, pabulum of death, depart from me because I am already taken by another lover, who obtains better rewards for me and pledges his faith to me with a ring, more noble than you by far in breed and dignity.

*Discede a me, fomes peccati, nutrimentum facinoris, pabulum mortis: discede a me; quia iam ab alio amatore praevenita sum, qui mihi satis meliora obtulit ornamenta, et annulo fidei suae subarrhavit me, longe te nobilior et genere et dignitate.*<sup>577</sup>

It is no wonder that the boy angrily rushes to his father in an attempt to use his political authority to force Agnes' hand.

After the prefect Symphronius hears that Agnes has scorned his son, he has her arrested for practicing the "Christian superstition," which he considers a dangerous and subversive form of magic: "Unless the Christian superstition, which you have [used to] perform magic arts, is separated from you, you will not set aside the insanity of your heart, nor attempt to reconcile with [our] most just council," *Supersitio Christianorum, de quorum te magicis artibus iactas, nisi a te fuerit segregata, non poteris insaniam abiicere pectoris, neque aequissimis consiliis praebere consensum.*<sup>578</sup> This "madness of the heart," refers to her unnatural love affair with what Symphronius believes to be a false god. He offers her the chance to preserve her virginity only if she will sacrifice to the goddess Vesta: "Hence it is necessary for you to hurry to the venerable goddess Vesta, and if the perseverance of your Virginity pleases her, you will remain hers day and night with venerable sacrifices," *Unde te ad venerabilem deam Vestam properare necesse est,*

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<sup>576</sup> Ibid., 1.2.

<sup>577</sup> Ambrosius, "Epistolae," 1.3.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid., 1.5.

*et si perseverantia virginitatis placet, eius die noceteque sacrificiis reverendis insistas.*<sup>579</sup>

The prefect treats Agnes with more respect here than the reader might expect from a source of this nature. In his mind, she is an insane girl who must embrace the proper religious observances of a Roman noble.

When Agnes refuses to sacrifice to Vesta, Symphronius angrily reacts to what he perceives as her “blasphemy against the gods,” *deos blasphemantem*, by having her stripped naked and sent to a brothel.<sup>580</sup> An angel of God enters the brothel and protects her from lustful eyes by flooding the room of her brothel with blinding light, “as if in her virtue [she was] the radiant sun,” *quasi radians sol in sua virtute*,” and by giving her a “stola of brilliant white,” *stola candidissima*.<sup>581</sup> The story has evolved from the growth of her hair in Damasus and Ambrose, to the bolts of lightning shooting from her hair in Prudentius, to the *stola* as radiant as the sun in the *Gesta*. The core idea of obscuring the gaze of the onlooker is still a vital component of the narrative.

The prefect’s son travels to the brothel in order to mock Agnes and have his way with her. After he enters her chamber bathed in the protective barrier of light, he fails to see the intervention of her God at work and attempts to lay hands on her with disastrous results: “But rushing into the light, before he touched her with his hand, he fell on his face, choked by the devil, he expired,” *Sed irruens in ipsum lumen, priusque vel manu eam contingeret cecidit in faciem suam, et praefocatus a diabolo exspiravit*.<sup>582</sup> Once the prefect learns of this, he immediately assumes it was her impious arts that took away his son: “Cruellest of women, you wanted to show the proof of your magic arts to my son,”

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<sup>579</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” 1.5.

<sup>580</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.8.

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.8.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.9.

*Crudelissima omnium feminarum, ad filium meum voluisti apodixin tuae artis magicae demonstrare.*<sup>583</sup> He desires proof of the magic she used against his son, but Agnes instead offers him proof of the legitimacy of her god by bringing his son back to life: “With her prayer, an angel of the Lord appeared and lifted her crying, and strengthening her spirit, she awakened the young man,” *Orante autem illa, apparuit ei angelus Domini, et levavit eam flentem, et confortans animum eius, iuvenem suscitavit.* The prefect and his son embrace Christianity, but they immediately face a new threat.

The haruspices and pontiffs of traditional Roman religion hear about Agnes and rally the *populus* of the city against her. The frenzied mob demands that the prefect hand her over: “Hand over the witch, hand over the evil doer, who manipulates minds and estranges spirits,” *Tolle magam, tolle maleficam quae et mentes mutat et animos alienat.*<sup>584</sup> The prefect attempts to defend her, but ends up being attacked himself: “His own deputy abandoned him to the sedition of his people,” *vicarium suum ad seditionem populi iudicam dereliquit.*<sup>585</sup> This vicarius or deputy Prefect, named Aspasius, takes over the persecution and calls for the imprisonment of Symphronius and the execution of Agnes. They attempt to burn her at the stake, but her prayers once again protect her from harm: “When she had completed her prayer, all the fire was extinguished, so that neither heat nor cinder remained,” *Cumque complisset orationem, ita omnis ignis extinctus est, ut nec tepor quidem incendii remansisset.*<sup>586</sup> Aspasius, blinded by the outcry of the mob, delivers the killing blow himself: “Then Aspasius, not enduring the sedition of the mob, undertook to imbed his sword into her throat.” *Tunc Aspasius, Urbis Romae vicarius,*

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<sup>583</sup> Ibid., 1.10.

<sup>584</sup> Ambrosius, “Epistolae,” 1.12.

<sup>585</sup> Ibid., 1.12.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid., 1.14.

*populi seditionem non ferens, in guttur eius gladium mergi praecipit.*<sup>587</sup> The attack on her throat silences her and prevents her from praying for intervention. She thus obtains martyrdom and is brought to her family sepulcher where her cult is to be observed by her family and eventually adopted by the Emperor Constantine's daughter.

The *Gesta* contains a number of narrative details not previously encountered. Her persecutors are granted a much larger role than in the previous accounts. The prefect Symphronius, who initially persecutes Agnes and orders her to be placed in the brothel, is particularly interesting. Encountering a sympathetic persecutor in a martyr *Passio* is uncommon to say the least. Ambrose and Prudentius treat the pagan persecutions as the work of mindless savages who are unable to see the overwhelming evidence of the veracity of Christianity right in front of them. Symphronius attempts to help Agnes abandon what he interprets as a superstition by having her embrace the worship of Vesta.

The Vestal Virgins were the only proper outlet for virginity open to a citizen of Agnes' status. It is important to note that this is the first time Vesta has been addressed in the story of Agnes. Prudentius simply refers to the pagan cult as Minerva, showing a lack of sensitivity or knowledge for traditional Roman practice. This source is particularly sensitive to Roman religion, mentioning the *haruspices* and *pontifices* of the temples and the Roman devotion to Vesta. The Vestal Virgins were still a dominant force in aristocratic Roman society in the early fifth century. Although Vestal Virgins ceased to receive government stipends after the Altar of Victory debate in the late fourth century, their cult would likely have continued to be funded by wealthy private citizens.<sup>588</sup> The direct reference to Vesta demonstrates that this source was produced at Rome for a

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<sup>587</sup> Ambrosius, "Epistolae," 1.14.

<sup>588</sup> Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, 50.

Roman audience, which was sensitive to the pagan cults still embraced by many Roman nobles.

The introduction of a love triangle between the prefect's son, Agnes, and her divine spouse is a new element of the story as well. Kate Cooper argues in *The Virgin and the Bride* that this lover's triangle motif passes into the *Gesta Martyrum* and later, popular Latin martyr narratives from eastern Greek sources as early as the fifth century. According to Cooper, the emerging genre of martyr passions developed from the Greek *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, particularly the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. In this second or third-century Greek source, Paul, Thecla and a jealous potential suitor vie with one another in a romantic triangle similar to the one seen in the *Gesta Agnetis* and many of the other *gesta*: "In the Apocryphal Acts, the disruption of conjugal relations typically followed the formulation of a spiritualized lover's triangle: the wife would refuse her husband his conjugal rights once she heard the preaching of the apostle."<sup>589</sup> These Apocryphal Acts were, in turn, influenced by the Hellenistic Romance genre: "The Romance of late antiquity takes the form of a saint's life, in which the chaste desire of the legitimately married hero and heroine has metamorphosed into the otherworldly passion by which a Christian saint embraces a childless death."<sup>590</sup> Cooper's thesis therefore establishes an eastern origin for many of the key narrative details which filter on down into late antique hagiography.

Cooper uses another famous Roman *Gesta* to illustrate her point. The *Gesta Anastasiae*, which deals even more overtly with the subject of marriage by featuring a married martyr, serves as Cooper's prototypical *Gesta*. Anastasia, her husband Publius,

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<sup>589</sup> Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 122.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

and her spiritual mentor Chrysogonus fall into the same lover's triangle found in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which is mirrored in so many other martyr accounts.<sup>591</sup> Cooper's evidence for eastern influences on the martyr narrative is undeniable, but it must be stated that this particular source of inspiration became predominant in the fifth century and represents only a part of the narrative framework. It is impossible to ascertain an exact date for the production of the *Gesta Agnetis*, the *Passio Anastasiae* or even the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. It is nevertheless reasonable to adopt Cooper's model and assume that the lover's triangle motif enters into the narrative at this point in time because of the growing prominence of these particular sources. If the *Passio Anastasiae* serves as Cooper's prime example, then the *Gesta Agnetis* bolsters her thesis as well.

The adoption of this motif from the Hellenistic Greek sources should not obscure the development of the narrative up to this point. In this instance, the introduction of the jealous lover adds to the narrative tension produced by what Hannah Jones describes as the "imperiled virginity" of the martyr: "The quasi love triangle between Thecla, Thamyris and Paul is often reproduced in the martyr legends, not least that of Agnes, in the form of the virgin martyr, her mortal suitor and Christ."<sup>592</sup> The influence of Thecla on this Agnes narrative is undeniable, but it would be a mistake to assume that the eroticized account of the virgin martyr, which developed from the Agnes model, depended solely on this one motif. Many of the eroticized elements of the Agnes narrative were elaborations made by Prudentius from the source material left by his predecessors. Ambrose and Damasus built the narrative details on a model for imperiled virginity already ubiquitously known in classical Latin and Greek sources. The imperiled virgin is

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<sup>591</sup> Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 141.

<sup>592</sup> Jones, 129.

particularly well developed in Livy, whose accounts of Lucretia, Rhea Silvia and Verginia bear strong resemblance to the virgin martyr. This author did not need to rely on a model found in works as obscure as the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* to build this motif of imperiled virginity; it was already prevalent in classical poetry of Virgil and the histories of Livy.

Another fifth-century source on the martyr Agnes, closely associated with *Gesta Agnetis* will help clarify this source's relationship with the eastern sources. An early fifth-century source, the *Sermo Agnetis*, credited to the fourth-century bishop Maximus of Turin, is found in many of the same manuscripts with the *Gesta* and in some cases even conflated with it.<sup>593</sup> Although it is similar in form to the Ambrosian sermon, its vocabulary and content indicate a fifth-century origin. The narrative relies heavily on the work of Prudentius, which has already been established as an early fifth-century production. The association of martyrdom with marriage can be found in both the Ambrosian and Prudentian accounts, but the *Gesta* embraces the notion of heavenly marriage to a much greater extent than in these earlier works.

In the introduction to the work, a close association is made between Agnes and the Virgin Mary: "In the footsteps of the Virgin Mary, she came to the heavenly bed chamber," *per vestigia matris virginis ad coelestem thalamum perveniret*.<sup>594</sup> This association with Mary is reminiscent of *De virginibus*, where the Virgin Mother also plays an important role. In this case, the association is much closer. In *De virginibus*, Mary was just one *exemplum*—albeit an important one—among many different *exempla* of feminine virtue. In this account, the virgin mother takes precedence with Agnes

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<sup>593</sup> Jones, 124.

<sup>594</sup> Ambrosius, "Sermo," 48. 1, *PLL* 16.

following in her footsteps. This demonstrates the prominence of the eastern cult of the Virgin Mother in northern Italy.<sup>595</sup> It also shows that virginity and domestic life—two radically divergent concepts in the fourth-century sources—were beginning to be reconciled. One could argue that this was the appeal of the paradoxical figure of Mary, who has the advantage of representing both of the predominant feminine roles in society, virginity and motherhood.

This conflation between marriage and virginity found in this text suggests that the author produced the work for a lay audience rather than for an ascetic community. In her examination of the *Gesta Agnetis*, Hannah Jones notes distinct differences in the narrative of this text and the ascetic message of Ambrose's *De virginibus*: "The Passio's treatment of the themes of family and civic identity suggests that on at least one level the text was specifically directed at traditional aristocratic families."<sup>596</sup> The author of the *Sermo*, dedicated to Agnes' feast day, appeals to a wide audience by comparing Agnes' love for Christ to the burning passion of the marriage bed: "Resemble this girl, oh girls, and learn how this child in respect to age burned in her heart with flames, like love, for Christ." *Accedite ad puellam, puellae, et discite in annis infantiae quales in pectore suo circa amorem Christi flammam accenderit.*<sup>597</sup> An invocation to "girls," *puellae* is made, with no reference to a specific monastic community as in the case of Ambrose's letter to Marcellina on behalf of her "sisters," *sorores*.

The author appeals to his audience members by overtly comparing the religious experience of martyrdom to "passionate love," *circa amorem*.<sup>598</sup> The *exemplum* of Agnes

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<sup>595</sup> Michael Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Princeton University Press, 1986): 84.

<sup>596</sup> Jones, "Agnes and Constantia," 126.

<sup>597</sup> Ambrosius, "Sermo," 48. 2.

<sup>598</sup> *Ibid.*, 48. 2.



is appropriate for both virgins and spouses: “Let them be eager to conquer the age for love of Christ, as a virgin for virgins and a wife for wives,” *sicut per virginem virgines, ita et per coniugem coniuges vincere saeculum pro Christi amore studeant*.<sup>599</sup> Although the metaphor of holy marriage may have originated as a helpful rhetorical device in the fourth-century sources, it evolves into a complex motif allowing Agnes to serve as an *exemplum* to virgins and brides alike.

The pseudo-Maximus Sermon dedicated to Agnes’ feast day supports Jones’ supposition that the *Gesta* was produced to appeal to a lay audience. Although Agnes remains an ascetic figure in the *Gesta*, who rejects earthly love and marriage for a spiritual union with Christ, the romanticized account presented in the *Gesta* puts Agnes’ drive for self-sacrifice into a context that a lay audience can understand. She does not reject marriage and the luxuries that accompany it; she is simply holding out for a more satisfying marriage with more rewarding luxuries. Although this method may seem similar to the *exempla* presented in Ambrose’s *De virginibus*, the blatant manner that Agnes uses to reject her worldly suitor offers nothing to encourage the Roman church’s laity to embrace an ascetic lifestyle. It simply describes Agnes’ virgin piety in terms that were easier to understand.

If the *Gesta* was not created to encourage the daughters of the Roman aristocracy to embrace an ascetic, virginal lifestyle, what was its intended purpose? The answer to this question of motive lies with the attention given to traditional Roman religion. The prefect considers the strange *superstitio* of Agnes to be a violation of a role normally reserved for the Vestal Virgins. When Agnes uses her power of prayer to bring the prefect’s son back to life, it is the *haruspices* and *pontifices* who are threatened by her

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<sup>599</sup> Ambrosius, “Sermo,” 48. 2.

actions and use the accusations of *magam* and *malefactam* to whip the Roman mob into a frenzy against Agnes. The *populus* of Rome itself is the most pivotal character in this version of the story. The original prefect of Rome sees the error of his ways and embraces Christianity. It is the mob of angry citizens, in this case the *populus* of the city, which condemns Agnes to death for violating proper Roman *religio*. The vicarius executes her because of the pressure imposed by their “revolt,” *seditio*.

Jones’ interpretation of the *Gesta Agnetis* relies heavily on Cooper’s revised understanding of the *Gesta Martyrum* as a collection. Cooper considers the *Gesta* to be the production of Roman “coalitions” of clergy and lay participants, which produced texts to serve individual interests.<sup>600</sup> Although Cooper is no doubt correct in this assertion, the *Gesta Agnetis* seems to be targeting those members of the Roman church who were still only nominally Christian. Although the Roman empire effectively became “Christian” during the reign of Theodosius, a core group of Roman elites must have remained dedicated to the city’s traditional religious practices. In the early fifth century, only a generation or two after the Edict of Thessalonica, it is safe to assume that the Roman aristocracy was still coming to terms with its newly adopted religion.<sup>601</sup> This is the most appropriate context for understanding the *Gesta Agnetis*. It is surprising how the elements of the old Roman religion vie with Agnes and her *superstitio* in this source. The *populus* of Rome itself is stuck between the traditional voices of reason and Agnes’ Christian authority.

In this way, the *Gesta* continues the process of Romanizing Christianity, which began with Damasus. Although Damasus’ seemingly insignificant *elogium* offers little of

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<sup>600</sup> Cooper and Hillner, eds., *Religion, Dynasty and Patronage*, 12.

<sup>601</sup> For a discussion of the effect of political pressure on religious conversion, see Ramsey MacMullen, *The Christianization of the Roman Empire, 100-400* (Yale University Press, 1984).

the narrative complexity of these later sources, it serves as a pivotal part of his Christian retelling of Rome's classical past. Ambrose, Prudentius and even the unknown author or authors of the *Gesta Agnetis* embraced this classicized portrayal of the martyr in order to appeal to their audiences. They use the imperiled virginity motif to establish continuity with popular classical stories, well established in Livy and Virgil. Agnes can serve as Rome's newest feminine hero in the same way as Livy's Lucretia or Virgil's Lavinia. She is the perfect blend of old and new, the Christian martyr as a retelling of the classical hero.

#### REMAKING THE MARTYR: AGATHA AND LUCY

The Agnes narrative, which developed over the course of the fourth and fifth centuries in Italy, eventually became the standard for many other female martyrs and saints as well. Many of the details that developed with each reiteration of the popular Agnes narrative can be found in other martyr texts. The Sicilian saints, Lucy and Agatha, follow this narrative design particularly closely with only a few details present to give them individuality. Lucy Grig hails Agnes as the "archetype" of the virgin martyr in western hagiography for this reason.<sup>602</sup> This process had already begun in the early fifth century with Prudentius' production of the Eulalia hymn. During the centuries that the *Gesta Martyrum* were being produced at Rome, popular accounts of the martyr Agnes began to be used to fill in the missing narrative details for other female martyrs. Although the evidence for this process is every bit as fragmentary as the sources of these martyrs, the end result is indisputable. The story of Agnes became the standard for female hagiography.

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<sup>602</sup> Grig, *The Making of Martyrs in Late Antiquity*, 79.

Lucy, the patron saint of Syracuse, and Agatha of Catania were martyrs without stories in the fourth century. If popular legends existed about these figures, no information about them survives to help establish their influence on the later medieval hagiographies associated with these martyrs. The earliest written account of the martyrdom of Lucy of Syracuse survives in the poetic works of Aldhelm. Aldhelm was an English poet who composed two collections on the subject of virginity, the prose *De Laude Virginitatis* and the poetic *Carmen De Virginitate*. As the Anglo-Saxon Abbot of Malmesbury, Aldhelm is obviously far removed from the site of Lucy's cult in Syracuse, Sicily. This source nevertheless demonstrates the ubiquitous reach of this popular legend by the beginning of the seventh century.

Aldhelm describes Lucy's background as a girl "born of noble descent and illustrious parents," *quam de stirpe bona et Claris natalibus ortam*.<sup>603</sup> Lucy is a noble Roman citizen, and much like Agnes she had no interest in marriage: "Not wanting to take the beds of young men, but remained betrothed to God by sacred pact," *Nonnulli iuvenes thalmalis asciscier optant, sed sacrata deo foedus sponsale reliquit*.<sup>604</sup> In an effort to heal her sick mother, Lucy travelled to the shrine of the virgin Agatha, an already renowned martyr in Catania. The shrine miraculously heals Lucy's mother, and the two of them decide to "offer their wealth and patrimony to Christ," *offerent dites patrimonia Christo*.<sup>605</sup> This magnanimous behavior attracted the ire of other wealthy citizens who eventually called for the consul Paschasius to punish the Christians. Paschasius has the young virgin thrown into a "brothel," *lupanar* and even attempts to

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<sup>603</sup> Aldhelm, "Poemata," *PLL* 89, 269-70.

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*

have her burned on a “pyre of flame,” *plurrima...flammis*.<sup>606</sup> However, Lucy was “protected by God,” *Defensante Deo*, and survived all of the torments and executions devised by Paschasius.<sup>607</sup> He finally succeeded in killing her by putting her to the sword: “He violated her white flesh with his rigid sword,” *Candida sed rigido violavit viscera ferro*.<sup>608</sup> This final line of Lucy’s story reflects the sexualized violence of Agnes’ own death in Prudentius; it also follows the same narrative pattern of exchanging a death by fire with a death by the sword.

Lucy’s connection with Agatha, the other virgin saint of Sicily, is far from coincidental. Aldhelm also composes a few lines of poetry on the martyr of Catania. It is clear from the sparse account that Aldhelm is not familiar with the details of the martyr’s life. Although the late medieval accounts of Mombritius and Jaccob Vorraigne describe a tale very similar to the *Gesta*, involving a scorned suitor and punishment in a brothel, Aldhelm focuses on the dreadful passion of the young virgin martyr: “[He] cut that chaste body with a cruel edge, he robbed her beautiful chest of its virginal nipples, and dripping purple blood flowed from her flesh,” *Quod castum lacerat corpus mucrone cruento / Pectora virgineis fraudantur pulchra papillis / Purpureusque cruor stillans de carne fluebat*.<sup>609</sup> This is another sexualized scene of extreme torture, which is once again reminiscent of Prudentius:

I shall receive all the iron into my breasts and I shall draw the strength of the sword into the innermost depths of my chest. Thus married to Christ, I shall cross over the heavens and all its shadows, higher than the ether.

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<sup>606</sup> Aldhelm, “Poemata,” *PLL* 89, 269-70.

<sup>607</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>609</sup> *Ibid.*

*Ferrum in papillas omne recepero / pectusque ad imum vim gladii traham / sic nupta Christo transilium poli / omnes tenebras aethere celsior.*<sup>610</sup>

Whereas Agnes offers her breast to the sword and has her head cut off, Agatha has her breast cut off by the persecutor's "cruel edge," *mucrone cruento*. The two events are similar enough to suggest that one must have evolved from the other. However, Agatha does not die from this torture. Her execution is intensified because of the failure of the "harmless flames," *Ignibus innocuis*.<sup>611</sup>

The details about these virgin martyrs, found in Aldhelm and in later medieval passions, bear a close resemblance to the Agnes narrative that had developed by the fifth century at Rome. Making a direct narrative connection is unfortunately impossible because of the utter lack of source material on Agatha and Lucy before Aldhelm's seventh-century poem. There is nevertheless plenty of evidence for the popularity of their martyr cults and the close association of these cults with the Roman church. Sicily was an area uniquely suited for the adoration of the virgin martyr. If any of the sparse details from Lucy's account can be considered true, a cult had already developed in Catania at the time Lucy was executed.

Lelia Craccio Ruggini points out the similarities between virginal Christian figures, like Agatha and Lucy, and the extremely popular cult of Demeter and Kore in Sicily. Demeter's cult was so widespread in Sicily that the ancient author Diodorus Siculus even considered the Lake Pergusa region in the center of Sicily to be the spot where Hades seized Kore and carried her off to the Underworld. Marguerite Rigoglioso suggests that this region was the home of a powerful local cult dominated by a fertility goddess before the arrival of Greek culture. The names and practices of the Greeks were

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<sup>610</sup> "Peristephanon," XIV, 76-80.

<sup>611</sup> Aldhelm, "Poemata," *PLL* LXXXIX, 269-70.

only applied superficially to what was already there and thus the Demeter/Persephone myth came into existence as the fusion of these two religions.<sup>612</sup> It is not hard to imagine that a similar thing happens with Christian martyrs in Sicily. Ruggini sees some evidence for this kind of syncretism in the way the Agatha procession in Catania mimics dimensions of the Isis cult.<sup>613</sup>

The cult at Catania was important enough in the early sixth century to receive patronage from Pope Symmachus, who built an elaborate church for the martyr in Rome. The *Liber Pontificalis* describes this church as just one part of an elaborate building program undertaken by Symmachus to restore the ancient martyr cults: “He made a church to the holy martyr Agatha, on the via Aurelia, at the Lardarium farm, he built it with a fountain at the foundation , where he placed silver arches,” *Hic fecit basilicam sanctae martyris Agathae, uia Aurelia, in fundum Lardarium : a fundamento cum fonte construxit, ubi posuit arcus argenteos.*<sup>614</sup> This is the first reference to a church dedicated to Agatha at Rome. No writings survive about the intention behind this patronage, but it is interesting to note that Symmachus was the first Pope since Damasus to encounter significant political opposition to his papacy. A major conflict broke out in the first three years of his papacy, which even led to the election of an anti-Pope named Laurence. Symmachus was only able to gain control of the situation after winning support from Constantinople, which in turn undermined the authority of his papacy.<sup>615</sup> Symmachus

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<sup>612</sup> Marguerite Rigoglioso, “Persephone’s Sacred Lake and the Ancient Female Mystery Religion in the Womb of Sicily,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Fall 2005): 12.

<sup>613</sup> Lelia Craccio Ruggini, *Christianization of Sicily, Third to Seventh Century* (Madrid University Complutense, 1983):228.

<sup>614</sup> “Liber Pontificalis,” 53.8, *PLL* 108.

<sup>615</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.1-5.

probably instituted his elaborate building program to bolster his authority in much the same way Damasus did a century before him.

An ancient church dedicated to Saint Agatha remains standing in Rome to this day. *Sant' Agata dei Goti* or Saint Agatha of the Goths became a hub for Arian Christianity by the late sixth century. It is unclear whether this is the same church as the Symmachan church at Rome mentioned in the *Liber Pontificalis*. If it is, the explanation for how it fell into the hands of the Arian Christians is unclear. By the time Gregory I became Pope in 590, *Sant' Agata dei Goti* was a popular heretical site that was essential for him to address. Once Gregory had gained control over the church, he decided to have it re-consecrated for Catholic Christians.

Gregory describes the ceremony held at this church in miraculous terms in the third book of his *Dialogues*. In a way, the *Dialogues* are Gregory's own response to the *Gesta Martyrum*. These three books recount the many miracles associated with the clergy of Gregory's day. Stories of Italy's ancient saints and martyrs are conspicuously absent from the account. A number of historians have even begun to view this absence as evidence for the *Dialogues* serving as Gregory's response to the popularity of the *Gesta* at Rome during his papacy.<sup>616</sup> Joan Petersen suggests that Gregory consciously avoids the martyrs of Rome's ancient past because the influx of the Lombards produced a new wave of persecution that deserved to be glorified just as much as the already well-known *Gesta*:

These men are martyrs of a new genre: they were Christians put to death for their faith without any kind of legal justification. They are not accused of breaking the law nor given any kind of trial, but are hanged or beheaded by lawless gangs of

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<sup>616</sup> R.A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and his World* (Cambridge University Press, 1997): 62.



invaders without being afforded any opportunity to defend themselves or to testify to their faith.<sup>617</sup>

Gregory seeks to emphasize the holy authority of the saints and monks of his church, not the holy men of a bygone era. It is for this reason that his miraculous re-consecration of *Sant'Agata dei Goti* is so unique.

Gregory primarily recounts the deeds of other distinguished Christians in the dialogue, focusing on simple country priests and monks as they struggle against the barbarian nature of the Lombard presence in northern Italy. However, it is Gregory's responsibility as the bishop of Rome to rededicate the Arian church of Agatha to the Catholic faith. He therefore recounts the event as a personal experience:

Having introduced there the relics of the blessed martyrs Stephen and Agatha in order to consecrate [the church] which was done. With great multitudes of people, singing praises to almighty God, we entered the church.

*Introductis illuc beati Sebastiani et sanctae Agathae martyrum reliquiis, dedicari debuisset; quod factum est. Nam cum magna populi multitudine venientes, atque omnipotenti Domino laudes canentes, eadem Ecclesiam ingressi sumus.*<sup>618</sup>

The crowd momentarily breaks away after the relics of Agatha are brought in and the sounds of a crazed hog scuttling out of the building are heard, demonstrating that the unclean spirit has exited the church: "Divine piety demonstrated, to the end we should understand how that the unclean spirit, which previously possessed that place, was now departed and gone." *Quod idcirco divina pietas ostendit, ut cunctis patesceret quia de loco eodem immundus habitator exiret.*<sup>619</sup> In this particular instance Gregory uses the relics of the virgin martyr to purify his church. In doing so, he uses the power of the martyr's prestige to bolster the reputation of his own ability to consecrate.

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<sup>617</sup> Petersen, *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great*, 77.

<sup>618</sup> Gregorius, "Dialogarum," III.30, *PLL* 77.

<sup>619</sup> *Ibid.*

Gregory's *Dialogues* are a famous or perhaps infamous example of Gregory's unbiased belief in miracles. Most of the account consists of poorly documented reports of miracles reported to Gregory through close friends. Joan Petersen describes the *Dialogues* as an attempt by Gregory to provide his dejected flock with modern *exempla* which paralleled the great saints of old: "It was immaterial to him, as it was to other writers in this class, that the same story was applied to more than one holy man; what was important was to attach to the subject of the hagiography an account of action appropriate to a holy man as such."<sup>620</sup> If it is true that Gregory wants to extoll the virtues of contemporary holy men, he does so to with the understanding that these figures are closely linked to ecclesiastical hierarchy. It is interesting to note that a number of these miracles are performed by Gregory's inner circle of friends and confidants. The miraculous cleansing of Saint Agatha's church is a particularly interesting story because Gregory was personally responsible for re-sanctifying it. It is at this point in the *Dialogues* where Gregory almost seems to claim responsibility for the miraculous undertakings at that church. Agatha has offered Gregory the opportunity to associate himself with the Holy in the most direct way possible.

#### THE VIRGIN MARTYR NARRATIVE AND PAPAL AUTHORITY

The various texts, inscriptions, and churches associated with Agnes, Lucy and Agatha, among the many other martyrs to eventually adopt the fundamental qualities of this narrative, demonstrate a need to tie virgin piety to the episcopal authority. The *Gesta Agnetis*, although written by an unknown author, was closely associated with Ambrose because he was responsible for the account in *De virginibus*. He was also a prolific writer

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<sup>620</sup> Petersen, *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great*, xvi-xvii.

as well as a famous bishop, making him an obvious source of authority. The *Sermon* ascribed to the bishop Maximus of Turin was another source of episcopal authority used by an unknown author of this Agnes sermon. In this final, popular phase of development, the Agnes narrative ceased to be shaped by figures of authority and became the inherited story of the masses. In a way, the Agnes narrative had always belonged to them. It was the *fama* of the martyr story that Damasus used as his source of authority. That original kernel of oral history was all he possessed with which to build his *elogium*.

Ambrose and Prudentius had the luxury of using this paltry source of poetry for their own works on Agnes, and although his influence is subtle, it is nevertheless important. Damasus was not the first writer to make the martyrs look like classical heroes, but he may have been the first author to conceive of them as Roman heroes. His mock Virgilian verse inscribed on the walls of important pilgrimage sites had an unknowable impact on the countless visitors to those churches from all over the western world. Prudentius saw the magnificent churches of Rome and read the tales of their heroes and returned home inspired by what he saw. Ambrose took a more practical form of inspiration away from the works of the senior bishop. From Damasus, Ambrose learned the importance of associating his episcopal authority with the martyrs, even to the point of making them the mouthpiece of his own particular theology.

Despite these achievements, Damasus continues to be only one important but small contributor to the Agnes narrative. Each source examined above brings new detail to the story of an ancient martyr who was only remembered for her extreme youth and modesty. Damasus did not invent Agnes in the same way Ambrose invented Protasius and Gervasius. He can never be called the author of the Agnes passion, but perhaps he

can be conceived of as its *auctor*. He was an *auctor* not in the sense of authorship, but in the literal sense of the word as the originator of an idea. His work survived not only because it was carved into stone, but also because so many others were willing to carve their own stories out of it.

A pseudonymous inscription dedicated to Saint Agatha survives in imitation of a Damasan *elogium*. It is unclear when this inscription was produced or how old it is in relation to the authentic inscriptions, but the differences in style and poetic form put it closer to the *Carmina Burana* of the eleventh and twelfth centuries rather than the poorly worded dactylic hexameter of the fourth century. The inscription ends:

Now smiling down like a bride in heaven  
Asked by miserable Damasus  
should he celebrate your feast day  
that you might nourish those celebrating

*Iam renidens quasi sponsa pole,  
Pro misero rogita Damaso  
Sic tua festa coli Faciat  
Se celebrantibus ut faveat.*<sup>621</sup>

The author of this inscription considered Damasus' accomplishment to be important enough to imitate. He even uses Damasus' name to give his *elogium* a stamp of authority. This pseudonymous inscription is only one of many. The later bishops and patrons of Rome never forgot about Damasus' contribution to the city of Rome and its sacred past.

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<sup>621</sup> Damasus, "Carmina XXX," *PLL* 13.

## CONCLUSION: AGNES IN AGONY

The previous chapters have examined the connection between Agnes' earliest recorded passion narratives. The four accounts differ in style, content, and genre, but in other respects remain remarkably similar. A few fundamental details, such as the young age of the martyr and the miraculous, rapid growth of her hair, stand out as part of the original popular account. These are the details that *fama fert*, "rumor relates" to Damasus and Ambrose. The first phase in the development of the female martyr narrative began as part of the popular Christian movement and was unaffected by these theological juggernauts of the fourth and fifth century. These figures nevertheless find a way to shape the story of the martyr to suit their own unique purposes. Damasus uses the martyr to bolster his authority, while Ambrose uses her example to establish the veracity of his own brand of Christian theology. By doing so, he indirectly bolsters his own authority over the Milanese church as well.

Prudentius is a transitional figure. Although he is also a prolific writer, he is a poet, not a bishop. He nevertheless serves as a figure of intellectual authority who shapes the martyr narrative to suit his own purposes. By adopting many of the details introduced by Damasus and Ambrose, Prudentius acknowledges their authority over the Agnes narrative. He supplants the *rumor* or *fama* of her origins with this patriarchal authority. Prudentius is not only responsible for popularizing these Roman martyr narratives, he also adapts them for a local, Spanish audience with his own account of Eulalia. He is instrumental in promoting a homogenized narrative of the idealized virgin martyr, replacing the more authentic martyrs of ancient Christianity with a female martyr more suitable for a patriarchal church hierarchy. This deliberate construction of the Agnes

narrative, focused on in previous chapters, represents a second phase in the development of the martyr narrative.

The *Gesta Agnetis* and the *Sermo Agnetis* represent a final phase in the development of the Agnes narrative. During the fifth and sixth centuries, anonymous authors produced new, popular accounts of the martyr narrative, adopting many of the details added by Damasus, Ambrose, and especially Prudentius. It was during these centuries that a common narrative for all female virgin martyrs began to take shape. The lascivious pagan suitor, Agnes' imprisonment in the *lupanar*, the adoption of the *sposa Christi* motif are all common details in medieval hagiography which all come together for the first time in the Agnes narrative. The later medieval hagiographies of Agatha and Lucy of Sicily and Eulalia of Spain are a testament to the influence of Agnes narrative throughout the centuries.

For the most part, this dissertation has focused on elements of the Agnes story common in all of the sources, the miraculous growth of her hair along with her age and stalwart defense of virginity. There is nevertheless one major detail that changes throughout the development of this story—the death of the martyr. Damasus has Agnes burned at the stake. Ambrose has her decapitated in *De virginibus* and then clarifies his position in *Agnes Beatae Virginis* by having her burned and then decapitated. Prudentius has her offer her chest to the executioner, only to be sliced at the neck to silence her defiant speech. In the *Gesta*, the martyr survives the pyre only to be penetrated by the sword of her persecutor. The development of the death scene is a crucial element in martyrology. The earliest accounts of martyrdom focused far more on the trial and resistance of the martyrs than on their torture and death at the hands of their Roman

persecutors. The plethora of early sources for the Agnes narrative provides the reader with the opportunity to explore the evolution of hagiography itself.

Virginia Burrus struggles with seeing the various versions of this death narrative as anything more than sexualized violence:

For the swordsman remains ambiguously identified with the phallic Christ, and the virgin martyr is inscribed not only as bride but also as victim in a Eucharistic rite that serves to define the priestly authority of “bishops” in apostolic succession to a Christ construed as both victim and sacrifice.<sup>622</sup>

Burrus is expressing a common scholarly position on the subject of female martyrdom.<sup>623</sup>

The episcopal authorities of the fourth century abandoned powerful, defiant figures, like Perpetua and Thecla, for female *exempla* who could be subservient to their own episcopal authority as well as traditional male patriarchy. However, adopting this position blindly without careful consideration of the source material undermines the significance of Agnes’ struggle with Roman authority.

The portrayal of a martyr locked in an agonistic struggle with his or her persecutors was common in the second and third-century sources. In her own prophetic visions, Perpetua fought as a gladiator against the personified forces of evil. Agnes is no different. She is a fierce competitor in her own right. For Damasus, Agnes “ceased to be a girl,” *liquisse puellam*, when she defiantly shunned the “savage tyrant,” *rabiemque*

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<sup>622</sup> Burrus, 45.

<sup>623</sup> For a brief survey of the rhetoric of Gender, see: Kate Cooper, "Apostles, Ascetic Women, and Questions of Audience: New Reflections on the Rhetoric of Gender in the *Apocryphal Acts*," *SBL Seminar Papers* (1992); Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles* (Oxford Calerndon Press, 1994); Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, 350-450 AD* (Routledge, 1995); Giselle de Nie "Consciousness Fecund through God: From Male Fighter to Spiritual Bride-Mother in Late Antique Female Sanctity," in *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Motherhood in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Anekke Mulder-Bakker, Joyce Salisbury, and Christopher Kleinhenz (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995); Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman* (Harvard University Press, 1991).

*tyrannum*. Damasus emphasizes the strength of will involved in such a sacrifice: “She willed her noble body to burn in flames,” *Urere cum flammis voluisset nobile corpus*.<sup>624</sup>

Ambrose’s *De virginibus* is the only source which portrays the martyr in a passive manner: “She stood, she prayed, she bent her neck,” *Stetit, oravit, cervicem inflexit*.<sup>625</sup> This is the most relevant example of a bishop crafting a passive female character to subordinate female asceticism to the patriarchal authority of the all male episcopate. Even Ambrose feels the need to portray this same martyr in a more defiant manner when he needs his own congregation to stand up against Roman authority. Agnes demands the executioner’s sword so that her holy blood can extinguish the flames of the unholy pagan altar: “Here, Here, strike,” *Hic hic ferrite!*<sup>626</sup> Ambrose changes the narrative to suit his purposes, and in doing so he acknowledges the authority of the female martyr. Her agony at the hands of her persecutors is pivotal to the entire martyr tradition; it cannot be completely ignored even by the author most responsible for ignoring it.

Prudentius is left to reconcile these fourth-century sources and does so by embracing Ambrose’s *Agnes Beatae Virginis* with his own distinct additions. In Prudentius’ account, Agnes bends her neck in order to pray to Christ, not to the blade of the executioner: “Having spoken thus, with her head falling she prayed to Christ as a supplicant, so that the impending wound slice through her bent neck more easily,” *Sic fata Christum vertice cernuo / supplex adorat, vulnus ut inminens / cervix subiret prona paratius*.<sup>627</sup> The same action that occurred in *De virginibus* thus has a dramatically different result. The act of praying is a final act of defiance against Roman authority.

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<sup>624</sup> Damasus, “Carmen XXIX,” *PLL* 13, 4-5.

<sup>625</sup> Ambrosius, “De virginibus,” *PLL* 16, 1.2.9.

<sup>626</sup> Ambrosius, “Agnes Beatae Virginis,” 8. 23.

<sup>627</sup> “Peristephanon,” *XIV*, 85-87.



Prudentius' Agnes does not submit to anyone; she remains steadfast in her devotion to Christ.

The author of the *Gesta Agnetis* embraces Prudentius' use of prayer as the final act of defiance. Agnes saves herself from the pyre with the power of her words: "When she had completed her prayer, all the fire was extinguished, so that neither heat nor cinder remained," *Cumque complisset orationem, ita omnis ignis extinctus est, ut nec tepor quidem incendii remansisset.*<sup>628</sup> The executioner stabs her in the neck with his sword in a final, desperate act to silence her and rob her of her power. Sexualized violence is an important element in these accounts. It is difficult to ignore the penetrating sword of Agnes' executioner in the *Gesta* and Agnes' demand for the penetrating force of the blade in the *Peristephanon*. The sexualized nature of Agnes' death is not just the product of a perverse male authorship that is incapable of seeing Agnes as anything more than a sexual object. Agnes' agony is a struggle to protect not only her physical chastity but also her spiritual innocence in the form of her overall "modesty," *pudor*.

The authors treated the body of the martyr in the same way as the martyr herself viewed her body. The body is just a body whether it is male or female. The pagan persecutors attack the body with earthly desire, while Agnes escapes to a spiritual existence expressed as a heavenly desire for Christ. Agnes struggled to preserve a quality fundamental to her soul. Her victory and subsequently her importance as an *exemplum* to prominent male members of late antique society stems from the defense of this abstract quality, not the defense of her physical state of virginity. This is why she does not fear the brothel. This is also why the sexual aggressiveness of her attackers has no effect on

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<sup>628</sup> Ambrosius, "Epistolae," 1.14.

her. By seeing Agnes as nothing more than a sexual victim, the reader risks misunderstanding the reason for her martyrdom.

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LCL            Loeb Classical Library

PLL            J. P. Migne, ed. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina* (Paris, 1844-1890, suppl 1958-74)

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## **VITA**

Eric Poché was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. He graduated from Brother Martin High School in 2001 and entered into the history program at the University of New Orleans. During this time, he served as a Research Assistant to the New Orleans Midlo Center, under the directorship of Connie Atkinson. He has worked as an Instructor and Teaching Assistant at Louisiana State University and as a Writing Coach for the A.B. Freeman Business School at Tulane University. He earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in History from the University of New Orleans in May 2007 and his Master of Arts in History from Louisiana State University in December 2009. Mr. Poché currently resides in New Orleans eagerly awaiting the birth of his daughter Marion Halcyann Poché.