

AMBROSE AND STILICHO: POLITICS IN THE POST-THEODOSIAN WORLD

by

CHRISTOPHER R. COTTEN

(Under the Direction of Dr. James C. Anderson, Jr.)

ABSTRACT

The Roman emperor Theodosius I died in January of AD 395, leaving his two young sons to succeed him. Into the power vacuum created by this situation stepped Flavius Stilicho, claiming that Theodosius, on his deathbed, had appointed him to be the regent for the two young princes and had left him in charge of the combined armies of the Eastern and Western halves of the Empire. To support this assertion, Stilicho claimed the backing of Ambrose, bishop of Milan.

This thesis investigates Stilicho's claim of Ambrose's support, as well as the larger question of what kind of relationship existed between Ambrose and Stilicho in the years from 395 to 397, when Ambrose died. Through an extended analysis of Ambrose's *De obitu Theodosii*, Paulinus of Milan's *Vita Sancti Ambrosii* and other relevant texts, this thesis attempts to flesh out what can be known or reasonably surmised on this question.

INDEX WORDS: Ambrose, Stilicho, Theodosius, Paulinus of Milan, hagiography, funeral oration

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DEDICATION

Ad uxorem meam.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Much of the scholarship regarding Ambrose has centered around his relationship with various emperors: Gratian, Valentinian II and, especially, Theodosius. No biography of Ambrose, or any of those emperors, fails to spend a significant amount of time on the relationship between bishop and emperor.¹ This approach has a long historical pedigree that can be traced back to the mediaeval popes who took Ambrose's excommunication of Theodosius as inspiration for their own confrontations with various European kings.² Given the great degree of interest in Ambrose's political relationships, it comes as something of a surprise that so little attention has been paid to the bishop's relationship with Theodosius' successor, the Vandal general Flavius Stilicho. Even the most recent critical biography of Ambrose treats their relationship, spread over the last three years of Ambrose's life, as something of an afterthought, especially in comparison with how much space is given to the other, previously mentioned, relationships.³ We know that some sort of connection existed between the two men: during the early months of 395, Stilicho claimed the endorsement of Ambrose in his bid to become the regent for Theodosius' two young sons. What kind of relationship allowed an upstart general to make such a bold claim? Modern scholarship is remarkably silent on this question.

This situation with respect to the state of scholarship was the genesis of this thesis, which constitutes an initial attempt to rectify the imbalance. It approaches the problem of Stilicho and

¹ See, e.g. F. Homes Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935).

² For example, there is the story of Henry IV standing before the gates of Gregory VII's palace at Canossa in the winter of 1077. Gregory seems to have explicitly had the story of Ambrose and Theodosius in mind as an exemplum. (Maurice Keen, *The Penguin History of Medieval Europe* [London and Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991], pp. 77-80. Consider, also, van Dyck's painting of the confrontation between Ambrose and Theodosius (Anthony Van Dyck, *The Emperor Theodosius is forbidden by Saint Ambrose to enter Milan Cathedral*, oil on canvas, ca. 1620, The National Gallery, London. This can be accessed online at <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk>).

³ Neil McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

Ambrose's relationship *via* an examination of the direct textual evidence for a relationship: Ambrose's funeral oration for Theodosius (the *De obitu Theodosii*), Paulinus of Milan's *Vita Sancti Ambrosii* and a few scattered references elsewhere. The period in question stretches from Stilicho's accession to power in the early months of 395 to Ambrose's death at Easter 397, but the texts that I will examine allow me to delve deeply into imperial politics in the period from 395 to ca. 425. The texts can say a number of things about Stilicho and Ambrose as individuals and political associates. But they also teach the careful reader lessons about the nature of late Roman political rhetoric and the realities of political interaction in the Roman West in the momentous years after the death of the emperor Theodosius, a time when the western half of the empire faced unique challenges and met with disasters that would undermine its very existence.

Furthermore, close examination of these texts allows important questions to be asked about the nature of late Roman historiography and biography and the construction of the individual in these and other works. The limitations of these texts as source material will be apparent: layers of rhetoric and polemical interest make it difficult, if not impossible, to get very close to the "historical" Ambrose or the "historical" Stilicho. It could even be said that they tell us much more about their authors (Ambrose and Paulinus) than their subjects. Conceding these limitations, these texts can provide answers to some significant and worthwhile questions – even if those were not the questions that the reader (or this writer) was originally asking.

Looking ahead, chapter two sets the scene of the opening months of 395 and discusses certain important themes that will recur in the texts under examination – themes that will serve as guideposts in navigating the textual evidence. Chapter three analyzes the *De obitu Theodosii*, a text that captures a critical moment in the relationship between these two men, as the reader will see. Finally, chapter four focuses on Paulinus of Milan's *Vita Sancti Ambrosii*, which includes a

number of important incidents involving Stilicho and Ambrose. After examining these texts, I will conclude by bringing together all of the relevant information and I hope to be able to say some important and useful things about the relationship between these men and suggest some directions for further investigation.

CHAPTER 2

APPROACHES TO THE QUESTION

The emperor Theodosius died on 17 January 395. He had ruled the eastern half of the Roman Empire for some 16 years and, for the last three years of his life, had been the sole ruler of the Empire. In that time, he had suppressed the rebellions of two different usurpers and stabilized the northern frontier of the Empire. But a host of dynastic and military problems surfaced in the wake of his death. Chief among these was the question of succession.

Theodosius' death was unexpected: he became ill during the winter of 394/395 and died suddenly in Milan at the age of 48. He was survived by two young sons, Arcadius and Honorius, neither of whom had reached the age of majority at the time of their father's death. There was no question that Theodosius' two sons would succeed him: he had elevated both of them to the status of *Augustus* some years earlier. The situation that obtained when Theodosius died, however, was far beyond the abilities of two young boys to control. The Empire was at peace, but it was a precarious peace that would require someone with an enormous amount of military and diplomatic skill to step in and fill the void. In the months following Theodosius' death, that void was filled by the Vandal general, Flavius Stilicho.

In the initial stages of his ascendancy, one of the pillars of Stilicho's support was the endorsement that he claimed had been given him by Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. He built this claim on a cryptic half-sentence reference to himself in Ambrose's funeral eulogy for Theodosius. But what Stilicho interpreted as an endorsement had its own context: Ambrose was directly concerned with the future of an Empire that had now been officially placed in the hands of two young boys. He, by means of the funeral oration, wanted to establish a place for himself and for his vision of the Empire. All of this was only marginally related to Stilicho himself. So,

why did Stilicho think that Ambrose was endorsing him? Did he have any basis for that notion? What was the nature of their relationship? This thesis will seek to answer these questions. It will examine the relationship of Stilicho and Ambrose and what it can tell us about the nature of imperial politics at the close of the fourth century. Using a set of four themes as my guide – “men of power,” barbarian rhetoric, political struggle, and the “politics of Catholic orthodoxy” – this thesis will closely examine the relevant textual evidence for Stilicho and Ambrose’s relationship. This first chapter will provide the reader with necessary background for this task by focusing on those themes that consistently reappear in the lives of these men, giving insight into the nature of their interactions and the socio-political realities that govern those interactions.

Men of power

First, we will see Stilicho and Ambrose as “men of power.” Aristocratic men in various positions (such as Symmachus, Ambrose and Petronius Probus) played important roles in the political conflicts of their day. These men used every means at their disposal in order to achieve their political goals, from rhetoric and political manipulation to outright violence. Training in rhetoric and its attendant tools and strategies was central to education in antiquity.¹ From a very early age, aristocratic young men learned the art of persuasion. In both written and oral forms they sought to communicate their goals and to persuade their audience, whether the emperor or a crowd or a political opponent. The texts at the center of this thesis provide especially clear examples of this. In his funeral eulogy for Theodosius, Ambrose deploys a wide range of rhetorical tools in order to reach out to a diverse group of constituencies to persuade them of the validity of his vision for the future of the empire. The bishop’s published correspondence also demonstrates this skill, especially his letters to various emperors, where the bishop is seen using every available rhetorical tool in order to persuade. Likewise, Paulinus’ *Vita Ambrosii*

¹ H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), pp. 274ff.

demonstrates this reality. Within that text, the reader sees Ambrose in his role as provincial governor seeking to calm the crowd in the aftermath of Auxentius' death by means of oratory.² Outside of the text, with Paulinus himself, there is a rhetorical agenda. Paulinus seeks to persuade his readers, in the setting of the controversy over the teachings of Pelagius and Julian, that Ambrose was a man who was in touch with God and was a paragon of orthodoxy. The use of rhetoric is evident in the writings of others as well. In his poetry, the poet Claudian manipulated his subject matter in order to advance the political interests of his patron, Stilicho. For example, soon after the death of Rufinus in November 395, Claudian composed the first book of the *In Rufinum*, which portrayed Rufinus in the blackest of terms and castigated him for thwarting Stilicho's political aims.

Another tool available for the use of the 'man of power' was violence. During the fourth century, bishops often employed bands of monks for violent purposes: Theophilus of Alexandria, for example, hired monks to burn the Serapeum. During the fourth century, legal precedents developed out of earlier laws aimed at Manichaeans and sorcerers that allowed the prosecution of pagans and heretics.³ Alongside these precedents, some church officials began to seek out the coercive power of the state in order to achieve their goals. Ambrose himself condoned and made use of violent force to achieve his political objectives. In the summer of 388, a mob in the eastern village of Callinicum, on the banks of the Euphrates, attacked and burned the local Jewish synagogue, as well as a chapel of the Valentinian Gnostics, all at the instigation of the bishop of Callinicum.⁴ Theodosius responded quickly and severely: the bishop was to pay for the rebuilding of the synagogue and the monks who destroyed the Valentinian meetinghouse

² Paulin. VA 6. This hearkens back to earlier examples such as the calming of the storm in *Aeneid* 1.148ff.

³ Caroline Humfress, "Roman Law, Forensic Argument and the Formation of Christian Orthodoxy (3rd – 6th Centuries)" in *Orthodoxie, Christianisme, Histoire*, ed. Susanna Elm et al. (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 2000), pp. 130-131.

⁴ The primary sources for this episode are Ambr. *Epp.* 40 and 41 and Paulin. VA 22-23.

were to be punished. Ambrose was in Aquileia at the time, and wrote a letter to Theodosius, who was in Milan, asking him to revoke his decision. In it, he draws upon anti-Semitic rhetoric, which was becoming increasingly common in the post-Constantinian period, stirring up antagonism toward the Jews over the crucifixion of Jesus and later instances of purported church burnings during the reign of Julian. Ambrose uses this evidence to try to convince the Emperor that reparations for the destroyed synagogue would be un-, and indeed, anti-Christian. He even purports to take the blame for the destruction upon himself: “I declare that I set fire to the synagogue, at least that I gave the orders, so that there would be no building in which Christ is denied. If the objection is raised that I did not burn the synagogue here, I answer that its burning was begun by God’s judgment, and my work was at an end.”⁵ As “men of power,” bishops after Ambrose continued to make use of such measures to achieve their goals. Ambrose’s attitude toward the use of force provides his readers with a snapshot of ecclesiastical attitudes toward the use of violence at the end of the fourth century. In the years after the incident at Callinicum, the attitude of church leaders to the use of force continued to evolve. From the time of Ambrose, who merely condoned another bishop’s use of monks for violent purposes, there is a clear progression into the fifth century when an increasing number of bishops actively sought the aid of imperial military and police power against heretics. The last years of the fourth century and the early years of the fifth witnessed a Church that was growing increasingly comfortable with its established position in the post-Constantinian Empire, all of this despite the fact that other bishops, such as Augustine, seem to have never been terribly comfortable with the overt use of force.⁶

⁵ Ambr. *Ep.* 40. “The synagogue here” refers, apparently, to the synagogue in Milan.

⁶ Erika T. Hermanowicz, “Catholic Bishops and Appeals to the Imperial Court: A Legal Study of the Calama Riots in 408.” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12.4 (2004): 483. Cf. August. *Ep.* 139.

An additional aspect of force was the use of crowd control techniques, by either oratory or the threat of violent action. For several years, Ambrose fought a determined battle to destroy the Arian faction in the Church. This brought him into conflict with the Emperor Valentinian II and Valentinian's mother Justina. The dispute centered on a request by the Arians in Milan that a basilica be handed over to them for their use, a request that the Emperor granted and that Ambrose vehemently opposed. The conflict began in earnest on 27 March 386 after Ambrose had refused the Emperor's orders to hand over the Portian basilica and to leave the city.⁷ Ambrose describes the events of this week, leading up to Easter, in a letter to his sister Marcellina.⁸ On 27 March, officers of the imperial consistory came demanding that the "new" basilica be handed over.⁹ Ambrose refused and, on the next day, the praetorian prefect entered the cathedral attempting to gain compliance. Ambrose claims that he had the backing of the people on this day and he again refused. Tension increased on the following day (Palm Sunday) when imperial guards entered the Portian and hung banners asserting imperial ownership of the building. While it seems that some of his parishioners went to the Portian in an attempt to defend it, Ambrose did not go and continued to perform his duties at the Ambrosian. A new step, however, was taken by the court on the following Tuesday when soldiers were sent in to enforce the sequestration of the Portian Basilica. It also seems that the court attempted to enforce economic sanctions on a large segment of Milanese businessmen who were seen as supporters of Ambrose.¹⁰ The siege of the Portian was broken soon thereafter by the threat of

⁷ For the date of this and of a previous letter (to Valentinian) as 386 instead of 385, see Seeck, *Geschichte des Untergangs*, v.204ff.

⁸ Aside from this letter (*Ep.* 76 in *CSEL*, 20 in Beyenka et al.), the sources for this conflict are numerous: Rufin. *HE* 11.15-16; August. *Conf.* 9.7.15; Soc. *HE* 5.11; Soz. *HE* 7.13; Theod. *HE* 5.13; Paulin. *VA* 13.

⁹ Ambr. *Ep.* 76 (20 in Beyenka, pg. 365). Ambrose's reference to the "new" basilica is to the Ambrosian Basilica.

¹⁰ Williams, 214-215.

excommunication leveled against the imperial soldiers. Two days later (Thursday), the soldiers were withdrawn and the imperial *signa* were taken down.

A second siege of the Portian took place sometime after Easter. Ambrose describes the situation in the *Sermo contra Auxentium*. He relates that he and his followers were blockaded inside the structure by troops. While barricaded inside the basilica, they kept “vigils all through the night and day,” and Ambrose passed the time by teaching his congregation anti-Arian hymns.¹¹ It appears that the court relented on its demands yet again, although Ambrose does not reveal its reasons.

Ambrose had stood his ground and had shown himself ready to meet force with force. But even he recognized that any resolution to the court’s actions was only temporary and that he would need more help.¹² Rufinus records that Maximus, the Western usurper, wrote a stiff letter to Valentinian saying that what Justina was doing (by demanding the sequestration of the basilica) was “impious and that the faith of God was being attacked and the laws of the Catholic Church destroyed; at the same time he [Maximus] began to move toward Italy.”¹³ Rufinus’ dates are slightly off, but the threat was very real.¹⁴ Ambrose, as a “man of power,” was quite ready to play this game of manipulation as well. In his letters to Valentinian, he cited Maximus’ forceful actions on behalf of Nicene orthodoxy in contrast to Valentinian’s heterodox stance of which, Ambrose implied, Theodosius disapproved. He also played upon Valentinian’s fear of a military invasion of his territory by Maximus, suggesting that, because of Valentinian’s heretical stance, Theodosius might do little to help him should an invasion come.

¹¹ Ibid. This episode is also described in August. *Conf.* 9.7.15.

¹² Ambr. *Ep.* 77.10.

¹³ Rufin. 11.16. The letter of Maximus is preserved at *Collectio Avellana* 39 (CSEL 35.1).

¹⁴ Maximus did not invade Italy until the summer of 387.

Barbarian rhetoric

Second, we will see how late imperial rhetoric about “barbarians” affected political relationships and influenced the actions of the emperor, the Senate, and other centers of power. We see this most clearly in the case of Stilicho and other Germanic officers in the Roman army during this period, such as Arbogast. Despite the fact that, in many cases, men like Stilicho and Arbogast were fully Romanized and fully integrated into the upper echelons of the military hierarchy, their political opponents in the Senate and among the aristocracy used the traditional *topos* of barbarian savagery and duplicity as a weapon in the political battles that they fought with these men.

Consider the circumstances of Stilicho’s demise. In the winter of 408, the Empire simultaneously faced several serious threats: on the last day of December 406, the Rhine had frozen, allowing a great mass of Germanic tribal groups to cross over into Gaul, sacking and pillaging at will; in the following year (spring 407), the general Constantine, the last in a string of usurpers who had seized power in Britain beginning in 406, had solidified his power on the island, and proceeded to cross over into Gaul with his army. The immediate response of Honorius’ government was to face the threat posed by Constantine. After one failed expedition under the command of Sarus, a Gothic federate chieftain, Honorius and Stilicho turned to Alaric for help, offering to appoint him *magister militum* in exchange for his help in Gaul. He, however, demanded four thousand pounds of gold as compensation. When Stilicho put this to the Senate, it resulted in much agitated debate, revealing the fissures that existed when it came to Stilicho’s policies, not only in the Senate but also between Stilicho and the emperor. The dissension soon spread to the army, where it was fomented by Olympius, a palatine official. The matter came to a head in August of 408. On 13 August, at an address given by the emperor to

the soldiery at Ticinum, Olympius executed a plot to murder all of Stilicho's supporters that were present. Just over a week later, he ordered that Stilicho, now at Ravenna, be arrested and detained. Before this order could be carried out, Stilicho had sought sanctuary in a church. He was lured out by one group of troops who insisted that they had no orders to kill him and then slaughtered by a second unit who had been sent to perform the execution.

The dissatisfaction that brought about the death of Stilicho had been growing steadily for some years. Olympius and his fellow-conspirators consistently gave out that they had executed Stilicho because (so they claimed) he sought to put his son, Eucherius, on the Eastern throne with the passing of Arcadius.¹⁵ The ancient historians all accepted this explanation.¹⁶ It seems more likely, however, that the senators, upset at having to pay yet another huge indemnity to Alaric, simply took up the anti-barbarian rhetoric that filled the air of late Roman politics and applied it to Stilicho; whether he was a "barbarian" or not was of little consequence. In examining the relationship between Ambrose and Stilicho in the early years of Stilicho's administration, I will try to point out how anti-barbarian rhetoric shaped political relationships at the highest levels. In particular, chapter 4 will examine how Paulinus of Milan's portrayal of the relationship of Stilicho and Ambrose can be fruitfully examined through the lens of late Roman anti-barbarian rhetoric.

Struggle

Third, I will give attention to the political struggles in which these "men of power" were engaged. At the highest levels of imperial government, conflicts took place in a very public setting. A good example of this is the dispute between Ambrose and the emperor Theodosius following the massacre at Thessalonika. In the spring or summer of 390, a riot at Thessalonika

¹⁵ Matthews, *Western Aristocracies*, 280.

¹⁶ Thomas S. Burns, *Barbarians Within the Gates of Rome: A Study of Roman Military Policy and the Barbarians, ca. 375-425 A.D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 219.

led to the murder of the commander of a Gothic garrison stationed there. According to Sozomen: “On hearing of this deed, the wrath of the Emperor was excited immediately, and he commanded that a certain number of citizens should be put to death.”¹⁷ Ambrose, and others, protested strongly but the order was carried out nevertheless. In response, Ambrose took action: he wrote the emperor a letter begging him to halt the death sentences.¹⁸ He then barred Theodosius from Communion until he should repent, effectively excommunicating him. Theodosius agreed to go through the assigned penance and was accepted back into the Milanese church.

Looking under the surface of this episode, one can gain insight into the nature of the political struggles of the era. This exchange has traditionally been interpreted as showing the complete triumph of Ambrose as Theodosius caved before him. This interpretation, however, is somewhat flawed. The only sources contemporary with the event – letters of Ambrose to Theodosius and to his sister, Marcellina – are highly polemical, seeking to present Ambrose in the best possible light for posterity.¹⁹ The second letter, to Marcellina, gives Ambrose the opportunity to play Nathan to Theodosius’ David. Another key feature of this type of political struggle, about which the sources are largely silent, is its dialogic nature. This episode should not be interpreted simply as a victory for Ambrose. Both bishop and emperor got what they wanted: the emperor saved face with the Christians of Milan and the bishop accepted the penance of the emperor in his cathedral. With this in mind, one sees not so much a domineering bishop as a political player jockeying for position and influence at court. Furthermore, one sees here an element of public demonstration. “Men of power” in the late fourth century were prepared to use whatever means necessary in the pursuit of their political interests. Sometimes

¹⁷ Soz. *HE* 7.25.

¹⁸ Ambr. *Ep.* 51. This letter has been dated to 8 September 390. See Beyenka, 20n. 1.

¹⁹ Ambr. *Epp.* 51 and 62.

this involved oratory (in the Senate and as a means of crowd control) and sometimes it entailed the use of violent measures, both of which are theatrical and demonstrative in nature. Nowhere, though, did theatricality play as large a role as in a prominent public display such as the *adventus* of an emperor into Rome or, in the episode at hand, the encounter between Ambrose and Theodosius in the cathedral. As was stated earlier, this encounter was beneficial to both men. In a single carefully orchestrated scene, Ambrose publicly asserted his political influence and Theodosius was able to portray himself as a penitent man, ingratiating himself with the Milanese Christians in Ambrose's congregation.

Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis will center around struggles between "men of power" over the future of Church and Empire. In chapter 3, which examines Ambrose's *De obitu Theodosii*, Ambrose uses oratory to conquer and set in order the potentially explosive forces unleashed by the death of Theodosius. In chapter 4, which focuses on Paulinus of Milan's *Vita Ambrosii*, I will show how Paulinus is concerned to depict Ambrose's struggles with the Arian faction in Milan and the imperial court in a way that shows him to be a "man of power" – a fighter of heresy and a man who is intimately connected to God Himself. Paulinus' concerns, as will be seen, are not disinterested. He himself is engaged in a larger struggle alongside Augustine against Pelagian teaching. As will be seen in chapter 4, Paulinus' interests in this regard affect his interpretation of the "men of power" who make an appearance in his narrative.

The politics of Catholic orthodoxy

A final clarifying theme will be the role of religion in defining the political interactions of Stilicho and Ambrose. Religious issues, as seen earlier, heavily influenced the political controversies in which Ambrose took part during his episcopacy: the basilica controversy of 385-386, for example. Questions of religious orthodoxy and heresy – Catholic orthodoxy, in

particular – also play a role in the relationship between Stilicho and Ambrose. A “politics of Catholic orthodoxy” – the phrase that I am using to describe a bundle of issues surrounding the interplay between “heresy” and Catholicism and both of these with imperial authority – took root during the last decades of the fourth century and fully bloomed during the fifth. Perhaps its main characteristic is an increasing reliance, in the Church, on the enforcement mechanism of the state, especially in the Church’s conflict with Arians and Donatists. Likewise, the state increasingly looked to the Church as a means of social control. The process was slow and fitful at first – there was, for one thing, no guarantee that the Emperor or important imperial bureaucrats would be sympathetic to Catholic claims over and above those of other parties.²⁰ Above all, the process was a slow one. Beginning with imperial legislation against Manichaeans and astrologers that provided the legal precedent for the prosecution of unorthodox belief, ecclesiastical and imperial officials established a body of law, preserved in the sixteenth book of the *Codex Theodosianus*, that allowed for, on a case-by-case basis, the definition of heresy and schism and the punishment thereof.²¹ Over time, especially after the reign of Theodosius, Catholic bishops could work in consort with Catholic emperors and imperial bureaucrats to achieve political and ecclesiastical aims. As stated above, this was made possible because of earlier anti-Manichaean and anti-sorcery legislation and a reliable stream of Catholic-leaning emperors, beginning with Theodosius. The Church’s reliance on force became apparent by the

²⁰ In the early 360s, Julian actively worked against Catholic interests by indiscriminately supporting other factions. In the 380s, as mentioned earlier, Valentinian II’s mother, Justina, actively worked against Catholic interests in Milan.

²¹ Caroline Humfress, “Roman Law, Forensic Argument and the Formation of Christian Orthodoxy (3rd – 6th Centuries)” in *Orthodoxie, Christianisme, Histoire*, ed. Susanna Elm et al. (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 2000), 125-147.

early fifth century when Augustine and other bishops appealed to Roman officials and military force to enforce the settlement of the Council of Carthage (411) against the Donatists.²²

The basic elements of this perspective can also be seen in the working relationship of Stilicho and Ambrose. Through an examination of the relevant evidence, I hope to demonstrate the interplay of religion in the political relationship of these two hyper-Catholics. After cutting through the rhetoric of the sources, one can discern important clues about the development of ecclesiastical reliance on imperial power, and *vice versa*, the sometime practice of the state in making use of the Church's own enforcement powers.

Illumination of these themes is not, however, an end in itself. Over the next two chapters, these thematic guidelines will not only help to interpret the texts under consideration, but they will also point up the larger significance of those texts and of the questions that this thesis puts to them. The legacy of Theodosius and the shape of the post-Theodosian world are of particular concern. Who holds power in this new reality? Upon what is that power based? Ambrose has a vision; Stilicho has one (buried under all of the polemic!) too. Do they intersect and, if so, where?

Aside from the specifics of the relationship between Ambrose and Stilicho, the episode reiterates some important lessons about late antiquity itself. The sheer amount of knowledge that we possess regarding the circumstances of composition of these texts allows us to draw some important conclusions about the realities of politics, hagiography, polemic and self-presentation in late antiquity.

²² W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*, Reprint ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 290ff. Cf. August. *Epp.* 128-129, 139, and *C.Th.* 16.5.52 (30 January 412).

First, the process of hagiography. As an emerging genre in late antiquity, hagiography took as its subject the lives of men and women who made names for themselves both inside and outside of the Church – especially those who came from the ruling aristocracy charged with the often-bloody task of keeping order. What to do with the questionable secular careers of these men in a work that emphasizes their relationship with God and must cast them in a pious light? In the chapters that follow, we will see two examples of this: Ambrose’s beatification of Theodosius in the *De obitu Theodosii* and the account of Ambrose’s career as governor of Aemilia-Liguria as reported in the *Vita Sancti Ambrosii* of Paulinus (see esp. VA 6, 7). The question is also raised in Iain Pears’ recent novel, *The Dream of Scipio*, where he considers the route whereby a secular-minded late Roman aristocrat (“a man of power,” to use my earlier terminology) and his mentor, a Neoplatonic spiritual guide, are posthumously canonized by the Church.²³ The actions of each of these men, historical or fictional, are ‘baptized’ retroactively just as the realities of imperial politics were papered over in the years after their deaths.

Hagiography, by the time of Ambrose and Stilicho, was very much a contextual process. That is to say, hagiography was almost never written in a vacuum. From the earliest surviving examples, Athanasius’ *Vita Antonii* and Jerome’s *Vita Pauli*, which sought to construe their subjects as paragons of Nicene orthodoxy in the midst of the Arian controversy, hagiography had a polemical context. The works of Ambrose and Paulinus display this same tendency. Ambrose’s construct of Theodosius is designed to make a statement about the course that he believes the Empire should take. Paulinus’ Ambrose is designed to fight posthumously the teachings of Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum. In light of these concerns, it is a mistake to think that these texts are only concerned to present objective information about their subjects. On the

²³ Iain Pears, *The Dream of Scipio* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2002).

contrary, these are dynamic texts; they were written to make arguments that were critical in the mind of the author. They will speak again if we attend closely to what they are trying to say.

This brings us to our next consideration: the importance of the political presentation and construction that dominates texts from late antiquity. Ambrose needs to present Theodosius (and himself for that matter) in a particular way in order to achieve his goals – the “real” Theodosius would just get in his way. Likewise, Paulinus needs an Ambrose that speaks to the issues of his day, namely the conflict between Augustine and Julian. So, the need to define oneself and one’s political and/or ecclesiastical opponents was felt just as acutely then as it is now. In our own day, consider the 2004 presidential election: George W. Bush’s success in portraying his opponent in a particularly negative way deserves no small amount of credit for his re-election in the face of domestic and international problems and lackluster performance in formal debates with that same opponent. These late antique texts are concerned with presentation in just the same way. They are thus no different from the speeches and ads delivered during modern-day political campaigns or from the kinds of rhetoric and symbolism that already-elected officials use to make their points. A disconnect remains, however. Even though we recognize the importance of presentation in modern-day political rhetoric – indeed most modern viewers approach things such as television ads and stump speeches with a healthy hermeneutic of suspicion – distance and time make the task infinitely more difficult. As an example, it can almost be guaranteed that at least some readers and viewers of modern varieties of political speech who approach them at a distance of three, four or more centuries will read them in a flat-footed way that takes them as objective statements of truth. This is because the reality of presentation is only brought to light when the text is seen in its cultural and political context. Reconstructing that context, however,

is painstaking work and often must remain tentative and incomplete because of a lack of source material.

This leads to our final consideration: the realities of politics. Political realities are often denied or minimized in the face of competing needs. This denial or obscuring is one important side effect of the needs of hagiography and proper political presentation. In order to achieve an intended effect or make an important point, stories must be simplified, character traits magnified (or minimized, as the situation requires) and unsavory details cleaned up. There is no time in such works for an adequate accounting of the hows and whys of political relationships, such as the one between Ambrose and Stilicho or between Ambrose and Theodosius. Such details would unnecessarily muddy what needs to be a clear and unambiguous picture. Thus, the task of uncovering the “historical Ambrose” or the “historical Stilicho” is rendered extremely difficult by the simple fact that the texts upon which the historian must rely are preoccupied with other things. So, in the chapters to follow, the reader will see how the details of particular incidents were subordinated to the image that the writer is trying to create, most notably the details of various exchanges between Ambrose and Theodosius, but also between Stilicho and Ambrose, especially the incident involving Stilicho’s slave, Cresconius. By simply shedding light upon sometimes mundane, sometimes intriguing political realities, the reader automatically has access to a much richer and more complex picture of her subject. The value of this is enormous in that it provides clues not only about the subject matter of this thesis (Stilicho and Ambrose), but also about similar relationships during the same time period.

With these possibilities in mind, I turn now to the texts at hand.

CHAPTER 3

AMBROSE AND THE FATE OF THE EMPIRE

Ambrose's funeral eulogy for Theodosius, the *De obitu Theodosii*, in many ways lies at the center of this thesis. As an account of *the* critical moment in the relationship between Ambrose and Stilicho, it demands careful attention and exposition. The *De obitu*, while often quoted, has not received a full treatment in English since the corrected text and commentary of Mary Dolorosa Mannix.¹ Mannix's work, however, is almost solely rhetorical in its approach – a majority of her notes merely point out Ambrose's use of a particular rhetorical figure. Moreover, from an historiographical standpoint, Mannix relies upon the quasi-hagiographical approach taken by other authors such as F. Homes Dudden. In this chapter, I will attempt to examine the *De obitu* from a standpoint that is more cognizant of the political realities of its day. To that end, I will discuss the speech's audience and the power dynamics that were at work among specific members of that audience. I will also discuss the speech's bearing on imperial politics, more specifically the nature of imperial rule, both that which Theodosius had exercised as well as the prospects that lay before his two sons, as presented in this speech. In the end, I hope to demonstrate that this speech is useful because it gives us insight into at least one vision for the post-Theodosian empire, a vision that reveals much about imperial politics at the end of the fourth century.

I propose to analyze the *De obitu Theodosii* in the following manner. Ambrose is, to some degree, compelled to work within the bounds of the accepted rhetorical structure for funerary oration. He, however, has three specific goals in mind that he is working toward in the course of this oration. First, Ambrose wants to help stabilize the Empire in the wake of

¹ Mary Dolorosa Mannix, *Sancti Ambrosii Oratio de Obitu Theodosii: Text, Translation, Introduction and Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1925).

Theodosius' death. Second, he wants to praise Theodosius for his virtues and, by doing so, help to cement the legitimacy of his sons, who will succeed him. Third, he wants to establish his own place in the new post-Theodosian order, in whatever form that new order may take. The remainder of this chapter will examine each of these goals, keeping in mind the themes of audience, power dynamics, politics and imperial rule that were mentioned at the outset.

Ambrose and the Fate of the Empire: Honorius, Stilicho, and the Roman Army

The death of Theodosius left the Empire in a precarious state. He had just quelled one rebellion, that of Eugenius and the *magister* Arbogast, but there was certainly no guarantee that the forces that had been behind the uprising (which lasted from 392 until it was put down in September 394) would not seize upon a moment of political uncertainty in order to reassert their claims. Furthermore, the eastern frontier had again become unsettled. Large numbers of Huns had poured down into Asia Minor through the Caucasus region; in addition, the Marcomanni were ravaging Pannonia. They had seized upon the emperor's absence in the West in order to make inroads into the Empire's somewhat weakly defended frontiers. Theodosius had been planning to return to the East to confront them, but now he was dead and his son Arcadius sat on the throne in Constantinople.²

It is safe, I think, to assert that Ambrose was well aware of these things as he prepared to officiate at the funeral of Theodosius. Much of his funeral oration is filled with transparent concern for issues of stability and order. The oration represents the bishop's attempt to impose order upon the disrupted Empire. It is an important moment for that very reason – Ambrose is peering into an uncertain future, and does not like what he sees. So, in this opening section,

² This reconstruction of events is based on Alan Cameron, *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 37-38; and Émilienne Demougeot, *De l'unité à la division de l'Empire romain 395-410: essai sur le pouvoir imperial* (Paris, 1951), 116-117. Cf. Claud. *In Ruf.* 2.26ff.

Ambrose addresses himself to the three parties likely to have the most influence in the new post-Theodosian environment.

Ambrose opens his address with allusions to natural phenomena, signaling the gravity of the occasion and the magnitude of the loss to the Empire, and also opening up a line of cosmic analogies and comparisons that will extend throughout the oration. Ambrose describes the death of Theodosius in terms very similar to those used by the Evangelists in their descriptions of the death of Jesus, noting that there were earthquakes and darkness that accompanied his death.³ The presence of natural phenomena is interpreted by Ambrose as a sign from heaven meaning that Theodosius' passing is of world-wide importance: not only his subjects, but Nature itself grieves for Theodosius.

The fate of the Empire is now in the hands of two young boys. But Ambrose is clearly more interested in Honorius, the younger of the two boys. Honorius is mentioned a number of times, with the opening and conclusion of the oration devoted to addressing him; Arcadius comes up once in passing. Honorius is portrayed in only the best light – he is an exemplar of filial piety, assisting Ambrose at the altar during this ceremony.⁴ He mourns his father's death, as is befitting the duty of any loyal and devoted son. For these reasons, it is doubly significant that Ambrose introduces the example of Joseph in paragraph three. The bishop is not merely introducing this Biblical *exemplum* as a justification for holding this ceremony forty days after the emperor's death. He is also linking Joseph with Honorius and attributing to the young

³ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 1: “hoc nobis motus terrarum graves, hoc iuges pluviae minabantur, et ultra solitum caligo tenebrosior denuntiabat quod clementissimus imperator Theodosius excessurus esset e terris.” Cf. Matthew 27.51 in the Vulgate edition, “Et ecce velum templi scissum est in duas partes a summo usque deorsum. *Et terra mota est et petrae scissae sunt...*” Also Luke 23.44-45, “Erat autem fere hora sexta et *tenebrae factae sunt in universa terra usque in nonam horam et obscuratus est sol. Et velum templi scissum est medium.*” (italics mine)

⁴ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 3: “assistente sacris altaribus Honorio principe...”

emperor all of the worthy attributes that his audience would associate with Joseph: filial devotion, compassion and strong leadership.

There is only so much, however, that Ambrose can say about Honorius – he is, after all, 11 years old. So, the bishop turns his attention to Stilicho and to the army. At paragraph five, Ambrose praises the foresight of Theodosius in providing for his children after his death.⁵ He mentions that they had been commended “to a relative who was present.” But, Ambrose is somewhat circumspect when he mentions Stilicho; he goes into very little detail and does not even directly call his name. Stilicho, of course, had made his claim to the guardianship of Honorius and Arcadius very soon after the death of Theodosius. But, can one read anything like what Stilicho claimed into what is actually said here? Taken in isolation, the statement would have served quite well as a piece of pro-Stilichonian propaganda. But other questions remain. Why would Ambrose single out Stilicho at this point? Would not the elevation of one man’s rather bald political ambitions only serve to de-stabilize the Empire, which is the antithesis of what Ambrose is trying to do in the *De obitu*? But, in fact, he does not do that. This brief mention of Stilicho is immediately followed by a discussion of the army and its role in the new order. Thus, Stilicho and the army are of a piece: they are the dual pillars of support for the young emperors. Neither of them is given an exalted role; instead, they are exhorted to support the governing institutions of the Empire and to maintain the imperial succession. This explanation fits with Ambrose’s pervasive concern for order and stability in the Empire and also fits the flow of the oration, in which a brief mention of Stilicho is immediately followed by a lengthy discussion of the obligations of the army as a whole.

⁵ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 5: “Nec immerito, si enim privatorum ultimae voluntates, et deficientium testamenta habent perpetem firmitatem, quomodo potest tanti principis esse irritum testamentum?”

Ambrose now moves into that discussion of the army and its relationship with Theodosius and, now, with Honorius. It would be hard to underestimate the significance of the role that the army will play in Ambrose's drama. It is for this reason that he constantly stresses the theme of loyalty in connection with the army. There had not been a true civil war in the Empire in some time, but Ambrose is certainly aware of the possibilities. In the winter of 395, following the battle at Frigidus in September, the eastern and western armies were encamped together. There was some hostility between these two forces that had just faced one another on the battlefield.⁶ Theodosius was dead and no longer commanded them, despite Ambrose's statements to the contrary.⁷ Whatever his motives, it is imperative that Ambrose secure the support of the army for the new regime.

But just how does Ambrose do this? As noted earlier (pp. 19-20), two of Ambrose's goals were to help stabilize the Empire and to praise the virtues of Theodosius. Perhaps the chief way that he achieved these goals was through the creation of a 'usable' Theodosius. This, I think, is the tool that he used to advance his primary goals. No matter what his ostensible subject was, whether he was speaking of the two young emperors, or of Stilicho, or of the army, Ambrose was busy creating a Theodosius who would adapt to his rhetorical aims with respect to any given topic that he chose to address. Stated in another fashion, the dead Theodosius was a more effective rhetorical tool for Ambrose than the living man had ever been: Theodosius dead could be shaped and re-shaped to conform to the values that Ambrose wished to stress.

What were those values? Primarily they were unity, loyalty and continuity – the very virtues that Ambrose wished to commend to the three parties that he was addressing in this section. In many ways, Theodosius (as will be seen) became even more than a rhetorical tool for

⁶ Claud. *Gild.* 293-301. Cf. Cameron, *Claudian*, 162-165.

⁷ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 6: "ergo tantus imperator recessit a nobis, sed non totus recessit, reliquit enim nobis liberos suos, in quibus eum debemus agnoscere, et in quibus eum et cernimus et tenemus."

Ambrose; he became a force, a representative of the Divine, enforcing these values. First, Theodosius was a father to the Empire, not just to his two sons. Almost at the outset of the speech, Ambrose made this point:

“Sed plurimos tamquam paterno destitutos praesidio dereliquit, ac potissimum filios. Sed non sunt destituti quos pietatis suae reliquit haeredes; non sunt destituti quibus Christi adquisivit gratiam et exercitus fidem, cui documento fuit Deum favere pietati ultoremque esse perfidiae.”⁸

[But he has left behind many as much as destitute of paternal protection, and most especially his sons. But they are not destitute whom he has left as heirs of his own piety; they are not destitute for whom he has gained the favor of Christ and the loyalty of the army, to whom he was proof that God looks with favor upon loyalty and is the avenger of treachery.]

So, Ambrose has created a big unified Roman family of which Theodosius is the father. The discussion of Jacob and Joseph in paragraphs 2 and 3 also aids in creating the image. While this is ostensibly a discussion of why Theodosius’ funeral took place forty days after his death, the Biblical *exempla* of Jacob and Joseph serve to underscore Theodosius as father. Theodosius becomes a father to his people in much the same way that Jacob, also called Israel, became a father to his people.⁹ Likewise, Joseph was loyal to his father Jacob in observing proper burial rites in the same way that Honorius is loyal to Theodosius in assisting with his funeral.

Also important is the *fides* of Theodosius. The word appears prominently in the opening paragraphs of the oration: it or a derivative is used 22 times in paragraphs 1 through 10. But Ambrose’s definition of *fides* and how it applies to the deceased emperor is slippery. For what seems to be a key aspect of Theodosius’ character, Ambrose gives us only one isolated episode in the life of Theodosius, heavily propped up with Biblical *exempla*. On the one hand, Ambrose’s rhetorical strategy with respect to the construction of Theodosius is most transparent here. A deluge of references to Biblical paradigms of faithfulness might, perhaps, hide the

⁸ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 2. All English translations are my own.

⁹ See especially Genesis 35.10-12.

paucity of concrete examples about Theodosius himself that Ambrose is prepared or able to give. The Biblical *exempla* are there not so much for their own sake but rather for the fact that they mention examples of faithful people in whose company the emperor now dwells. Theodosius is thus made faithful by his association with these paragons of faithfulness. The result is that Theodosius now conforms to a particular value that Ambrose is emphasizing for the army. On the other hand, however, Theodosius' *fides* is a part of Ambrose's concern for *fides* toward the sons of the dead emperor. Emphasis on Theodosius' faithfulness, and the faithfulness of the *exempla*, is designed to put pressure on influential individuals in his audience (i.e. Stilicho and the other generals), perhaps more so than being merely an attempt to account for an apparent lack of *fides* on the part of Theodosius.

The last point to be made about Theodosius is that his laws and words, his will, must be obeyed. In this, Ambrose stresses the value of continuity (and legitimacy), which was so critical at this moment. Ambrose is also keen to stress the connection between father and sons in this regard. At the outset, Honorius and Arcadius are emphatically referred to as the heirs (*haeredes*) of Theodosius. Their father gave them everything, all the marks of legitimacy, even before he died: his empire, his power and the title *Augustus*.¹⁰ Because they are his heirs, Ambrose says, they will uphold all of their father's policies:

“Sed non negabunt filii quod donavit pater, non negabunt, etiamsi quidam inturbare conatus sit...”¹¹

[But the sons will not deny that which the father granted, they will not deny it, even if anyone should attempt to interfere...]

This applies explicitly to Theodosius' edicts of clemency about which there was some controversy, and to his mitigation of the grain tax.¹² The issue of continuity is even more

¹⁰ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 5: “Nihil gloriosius exitus tanti principis habuit, qui omnia iam filiis tradidisset, regnum, potestatem, nomen Augusti.”

¹¹ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 4.

significant in relation to Theodosius' will. His will must be carried out precisely because of what it contains, or is said to contain. It is within this framework, enshrouded in the imperative of fulfilling the last wishes of a dead emperor, that Ambrose mentions Stilicho and his alleged guardianship over Honorius and Arcadius. Thus, Theodosius' death provides not only the continuity of a succession to his two sons but also the familial continuity of a guardian who married into Theodosius' family. All of these very this-worldly facts are buffered by Theodosius' entrance into heaven:

“Et ille quidem abiit accipere sibi regnum, quod non deposuit sed mutavit, in tabernacula Christi iure pietatis adscitus, in illam Hierusalem supernam.”¹³

[And indeed he departed to receive a kingdom for himself, which he did not put aside but exchanged, having entered into the tabernacles of Christ by right of piety, for that heavenly Jerusalem.]

Admission into heaven is the final and definitive test of an emperor's worth and legitimacy and is presented in very stark terms:

“Manet ergo in lumine Theodosius et sanctorum coetibus gloriatur...Contra autem Maximus et Eugenius in inferno, quasi *nox nocti indicat scientiam*; docentes exemplo miserabili quam durum sit arma suis principibus irrogare.”¹⁴

[Therefore Theodosius remains in the light and glories in the assemblies of the saints...Not so, however, for Maximus and Eugenius, who are in hell, as it says ‘night unto night sheweth knowledge’, teaching by their miserable example how hard it is to take up arms against one's leaders.]

So, Theodosius' grand *adventus* into heaven seals the argument for Ambrose. There can be no question of the legitimacy of the new emperors and the army is obligated to support them in the same way that it supported Theodosius.

¹² This situation is discussed by Mannix, pg. 91. Ambrose urged mercy upon Theodosius in *Epp.* 61 and 62. The clemency measures were renewed by Honorius and Arcadius; see *C.Th.* 15.14.9-12.

¹³ *Ambr. de ob. Theod.* 2.

¹⁴ *Ambr. de ob. Theod.* 39. It is perhaps worth noting here that Maximus' stringent orthodoxy, which Ambrose had used as a leveraging tool in the basilica conflicts with Valentinian II during the mid-380s, was not enough to gain him entrance into Ambrose's heaven now. Cf. Sabine G. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 149-150. Ambrose quotes (*nox nocti indicat scientiam*) Psalm 18.3 (Vulgate), which is Psalm 19.2 in the English Bible. The translation of the psalm is from the Authorized Version.

In pursuit of this goal (i.e. the goal of obtaining the army's support), Ambrose devises a unique formula, a new equation of Late Roman imperial governance that deserves some attention. Addressing the army (or the army officers present), he says:

“Nec moveat aetas; fides militum imperatoris perfecta est aetas; est enim perfecta aetas ubi perfecta est virtus. Reciproca haec; quia et fides imperatoris militum virtus est.”¹⁵

[Let not their age disturb you; the faith (*fides*) of the soldiers makes perfect the age of the emperor; for age is perfected where strength is perfected. These things are reciprocal; since the faith (*fides*) of the emperor is also the strength of his soldiers.]

Ambrose is seeking to press the values of unity, loyalty and continuity that so dominate the first third of the oration. Faith (*fides*) is very much a reciprocal exercise: Theodosius' faith, which was “robust” (*validus*), was the victory of the army.¹⁶ Likewise, the faith of the army will be the victory, or the strength, of the boy emperors.¹⁷ The significance of this arrangement should not be overlooked.

Ambrose opens and closes his remarks to the army (paragraphs 6 and 11) by extending the notion of reciprocity. The language of “owing” in paragraph 11 ties in nicely with the language of reciprocity used in paragraph 6.¹⁸ The soldiers owe their loyalty to the new emperor; it is their obligation.

Ambrose and Theodosius: The Construction of a Relationship

At every major point of religious conflict during the reign of Theodosius (379-395), Ambrose sought to influence the emperor, through letters, personal visits, and political maneuvering, pushing Catholic interests whether the emperor had solicited his advice or not. As

¹⁵ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 6.

¹⁶ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 7: “Theodosii ergo fides fuit vestra victoria...”

¹⁷ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 7: “...vestra fides filiorum eius fortitudo sit.”

¹⁸ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 11: “solvite filiis eius quod *debetis* patri; plus *debetis* defuncto quam *debuistis* viventi.” (italics mine)

noted earlier, one of Ambrose's goals in the *De obitu Theodosii* was to praise Theodosius for his virtues and, by doing so, to help to cement the legitimacy of his sons, who would succeed him. Ambrose does this most clearly in the large middle section of the oration that is devoted to an *encomium* of Theodosius. Also in this section, Ambrose continues to be interested in creating a 'usable' Theodosius, an emperor who complements his own rhetorical aims in the oration as a whole. The bishop has already begun this process in some important ways: in an effort to emphasize certain virtues as an appropriate response to the situation at hand, Ambrose has created a Theodosius who matches those virtues. In this section, which focuses on the person of Theodosius, the ways that Ambrose continues this process will be noted. The focus of this section of my discussion will be to examine the specific incidents that Ambrose cites and attempt to understand them in the context of late-fourth century imperial politics, seeking to cut through the rhetorical strategies that Ambrose employs and that historians since have used to describe the relationship between these two men.

The middle section of the eulogy, conveniently enough, can be broken down into two segments, which mirror one another and play off each other to a certain degree. In the first segment (12-32), Ambrose expounds upon Theodosius' character; the second segment (33-53) deals with Ambrose's relationship with Theodosius and includes some insight into particular incidents in which they interacted one with the other.

The first segment begins with a transitional passage that links the previous discussion of *fides* with the discussion of Theodosius' virtues that comes afterwards. Despite the opening "addatur eo...", which might lead his hearers to think that what Ambrose is about to say is merely an addition to what has already been said, paragraph 12 does in fact introduce a new line of discourse. This can be seen most clearly in terms of semantic density – paragraph 12

witnesses a sharp decrease and cessation of the use of *fides* and its derivatives. Ambrose in turn shifts to a discussion of Theodosius' virtues: the emperor was merciful, pious, loving and faithful.¹⁹

Paragraphs 13-14 deal with issues of clemency and anger. This is a potentially volatile topic for Ambrose to broach, given the occasion of the oration, and has the potential to derail Ambrose's entire construct. How does Ambrose address the topic? First, there is the reality of an emperor who could become very angry. Several instances bear this out. For instance, there is the time when he let the bishop know, in no uncertain terms, that he would not tolerate information leaks at court.²⁰ Consider also his reaction to public disturbances, such as the Revolt of the Statues at Antioch in 387 (even though Theodosius was lauded for his restraint in this situation) and the infamous massacre at Thessalonika three years later.²¹ The emperor's *iracundia* is also noted by Claudian and Libanius.²² This propensity to anger was born out of the absolute power that the emperor wielded.²³ There were very few institutionalized controls on the emperor's behavior at the close of the fourth century; traditional advisory and consensus-building mechanisms that existed for the emperor, such as the consistory, or the Senate, or the imperial bureaucracy, could be, and often were, ignored. All of this, however, does not fit the image of Theodosius that Ambrose has been working so hard to create. So, Ambrose has to cover for Theodosius' indiscretions, which he does essentially by making a virtue out of necessity. He obliquely admits that Theodosius had a temper, but his anger was acceptable

¹⁹ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 12: "Addatur eo cuius imperatoris! imperatoris *pii*, imperatoris *miseri cordis*, imperatoris *fidelis*..." 14: "Sati us est in indignatione laudem, *clementiae* reperire, quam ira in ultionem excitari." (italics mine)

²⁰ For this incident, see Neil McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 314-315.

²¹ For the riot at Antioch, see McLynn, 319 and Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 105-109.

²² Claud. *VI Cons.* 111-112. Lib. *Or.* 19.45-47; 20.12-14.

²³ William V. Harris, *Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 261.

because it gave opportunity for pardon.²⁴ Moreover, Ambrose recalls how forgiving and how clement Theodosius could be, *especially* when he was most angry:

“Beneficium se putabat accepisse augustae memoriae Theodosius cum rogaretur ignoscere et tunc proprior erat veniae cum fuisset commotio maior iracundiae. Praerogativa ignoscendi erat indignatum fuisse, et optabatur in eo, quod in aliis timebatur, ut irasceretur.”²⁵

[Theodosius thought that he himself had received a kindness when he was asked to pardon and he was closer to forgiveness at the very time when the disturbance of his anger had been greater. A sure sign of his forgiveness was that he had been upset, and it was desired in him that he might be angered, a thing that was feared in others.]

His choice of *exempla* in this section is intriguing: there is a citation from Plato’s *Laws* (9.7ff.) and then one from the Psalms (4.4 LXX). For Ambrose, Scripture clearly trumps Plato; but what is the significance of these citations? Peter Brown writes at some length about the philosopher as an agent of anger control for a ruler and that is indeed what we see in Ambrose’s published correspondence and in the *De obitu Theodosii*.²⁶ But it is hard to see this section of the *De obitu* as particularly prophetic or courageous, spoken as it is *after* the death of the emperor. What seems to happen is quite the reverse: the bishop is only a prophet after the fact, and his citation of Scripture is not (and cannot be) used to call Theodosius to repentance, rather the dead emperor is re-shaped to fit the imperative of Scripture and the virtues that Ambrose has already attributed to him. More in line, however, with the overall thrust of the oration, Ambrose might instead be understood to be using this as a teaching moment for his audience: the lesson of Theodosius’ attitude toward anger was a lesson that Honorius, Stilicho and the commanders of the army needed to hear and to emulate.

²⁴ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 4. See also Ambr. *Ep.* 51.4 where Theodosius is said to have an “impetum naturae.”

²⁵ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 13.

²⁶ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 66-67 and 110-113.

Paragraphs 15 and 16 address another of Theodosius' virtues: he is, and will continue to be, the protector of his children. Ambrose is serving two purposes here: first, he is further embellishing the picture of Theodosius that he has created. Second, he is again addressing the question of legitimacy and succession in a way that directly speaks to the concerns of his audience. First, the virtues of Theodosius. Ambrose asks,

“Quis ergo dubitabit filiis eius apud Dominum maximum praesidium fore?”²⁷

[Who therefore doubts that he will be a great defender of his sons in the house of the Lord?]

He answers the question most directly through the use of two Biblical *exempla* and through an appeal to the character (or potential character) of the emperor's sons, Arcadius and Honorius. The argument proceeds thus: Arcadius and Honorius are young; in fact, Honorius is but a little older than was King Josiah when he ascended the throne of Judah.²⁸ Asa, an earlier king of Judah, also ascended the throne at an early age.²⁹ Asa and Josiah both ruled for many years and pleased the Lord despite the fact that they both had unbelieving fathers.³⁰ How much better then will Arcadius and Honorius be, given that their father was “filled with the fear of God...filled with mercy...[and] stands before Christ as a protector of his children”?³¹ So Theodosius' virtues do not simply extend to his imperial office but also to his family, in particular his beloved sons. Ambrose also takes care here to emphasize Theodosius' humility as part of the overall picture that he is constructing. This humility, which makes Theodosius into a more malleable character, will be useful later in Ambrose's re-interpretation of Theodosius' “repentance” in the cathedral

²⁷ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 15.

²⁸ 2 Kings 22.1.

²⁹ 1 Kings 15.10. Cf. 2 Chronicles 14.11-12 and 16.3-12.

³⁰ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 16: “patres...infideles”

³¹ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 16: “Theodosius vero plenus timoris Dei, plenus misericordiae, speramus quod liberis suis apud Christum praesul adstatat...”

at Milan. The prideful and very powerful emperor is modified so as to correspond more closely to the humility that Ambrose is emphasizing in this speech.

Ambrose's other purpose in highlighting Theodosius' role as protector of his children is to address again the all-important question of legitimacy and succession for his audience. The implication of the statement seems clear enough: the two sons of Theodosius are the new emperors and as such they deserve the respect of everyone. Moreover, should there be anyone who is disinclined to render respect to them, their father is looking out for them and protecting them. The significance of this, however, goes much deeper than just the death of Theodosius. Ambrose, in discussing Theodosius as *maximum praesidium* and (later) in discussing his entrance into heaven to be with his imperial colleagues, is responding to the perennial Roman concern about the afterlife of the emperor, behind which lay deeper concerns about what was to happen to the empire now that the emperor was dead.³² The process of *consecratio*, a long-established practice with its roots in Hellenistic kingship and the deification of Caesar, helped to answer this question by the assertion that, in fact, the emperor was still alive. As the official interpretation of the death of the emperor, *consecratio* and its attendant notion that the emperor was still alive established, in Ambrose's day, not only continuity between an emperor and his successor, but also a link between heaven and earth. This was new; it was an element of that interpretation that had not been present earlier.³³ The link between heaven and earth comes to fuller fruition in the *De obitu*.

³² MacCormack's statement (*Art and Ceremony*, 95) is worth noting here. She says, "Almost from the beginning, coming to terms with the death of emperors was a process which revolved around two interdependent poles: on the one hand, there was concern over the status of the emperor after death, and on the other, the emperor's status after death was an important, often crucial factor in establishing a legitimate succession. The dead emperor's *consecratio* and funeral supplied one of the few methods – at times the only one – of providing his successor with a legitimate, publicly ratifiable, succession. This aspect of Roman imperial theory was, of course, articulated in the framework of pagan religion, but it ran so deep that it entered Christian Byzantium; with it came many a pagan way of seeing the world, which passed over this watershed between the pagan and Christian empires."

³³ MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony*, 120-121.

After emphasizing Theodosius' role as the protector of his children, Ambrose comes to what might be called the center of the oration. Paragraphs 17-23 work off of the reading of Psalm 114.1 in the liturgy.³⁴ The primary virtue of Ambrose's Theodosius is his love:

“Et vere dilexit qui officia diligentius implevit, qui servavit hostes, qui dilexit inimicos, qui iis a quibus est appetitus ignovit, qui regni affectatores perire non est passus. Non mediocris sed perfecti in Lege vox ista est dicere: dilexi, *plenitudo enim Legis dilectio est.*”³⁵

[And truly he has loved who discharged his duties diligently, who preserved his enemies, who loved those who opposed him, who pardoned those by whom he was sought after, who did not suffer the aspirants to the Empire to die. That voice is not of one who was ordinary but of one who is perfect in the Law that says: ‘I have loved, for love is the fullness of the Law.’]

In support of this, Ambrose introduces three distinct Biblical *exempla*: Peter (John 21), Paul (2 Timothy 4.7-8) and Moses (Exodus 14.15). These are introduced in support of particular theological points that Ambrose wants to make about Theodosius. The organizing principle of Ambrose's exposition here is the words that the Psalmist uses in Psalm 114.1-3.³⁶ So, Ambrose takes Psalm 114.1 (“Dilexi quoniam exaudiet Dominus vocem orationis meae”) and sets alongside of it Peter's exchange with Jesus in the 21st chapter of the Gospel of John. For Ambrose, Peter's threefold assertion that he loves Jesus (“Tu scis Domine quia diligo te”) wipes away his threefold denial of Jesus and, thus, fulfills the law.³⁷ Likewise, Theodosius' love is cited by Ambrose as evidence that Theodosius fulfilled the law, in accordance with Paul's statement in Romans 13.10, cited by Ambrose in paragraph 17, that “Love is the fulfillment of the law.”³⁸ Paul's words in 2 Timothy 4.7-8 are used in a similar fashion. Coming off Psalm

³⁴ Psalm 114.1 according to the Vulgate enumeration; in the English Bible, this is Psalm 116.1: “Dilexi quoniam exaudiet Dominus vocem orationis meae.”

³⁵ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 17.

³⁶ Again, this is Psalm 116 in the English Bible.

³⁷ Ambrose's text differs significantly from the Vulgate, which reads: “Etiam Domine tu scis quia amo te.” (John 21.15ff.)

³⁸ The Vulgate rendering of Romans 13.10 (*Plenitudo ergo legis est dilectio*) differs slightly from Ambrose's text, which reads: “*Plenitudo enim legis est dilectio.*”

114.1, Ambrose makes a connection with Paul's words in 2 Timothy, asserting that, like Paul, Theodosius' prayers had been heard because of his love. The *exemplum* of Moses is also used by Ambrose to highlight another side of Theodosius' character. The bishop, taking Psalm 114.2 as a starting point, greatly expands upon the text:

*"Dilexi et ideo inclinavit aurem suam mihi, ut iacentem erigeret, mortuum resuscitaret. Non enim Deus inclinat aurem suam ut audiat corporaliter, sed ut condescendat nobis, quo nos audire dignetur et infirmitatis nostrae relevare substantiam."*³⁹

[‘I have loved’ and therefore ‘he inclined his ear to me,’ so that he might raise up the downcast, so that he might revive the dead. For God does not incline his ear so that he might hear bodily, but so that he might condescend to us, by whom it might be thought worthy to hear us and to ease the weight of our infirmity.]

This editorial expansion is needed in order to make some sort of connection with Moses, who is artificially portrayed in a position of weakness that matches the kind of effect that Ambrose wants to create for Theodosius. Coupled with an oblique reference to the murder of Abel (Genesis 4), Ambrose uses these passages to construct an image (that will be seen later) of a Theodosius who is weak and humble before God, and ultimately weak and humble (or pliable) before Ambrose.

In paragraphs 24-32, we reach the climax of what Ambrose has been trying to do for some time now. Paragraphs 24-27 are made up of a brief doctrinal exposition of God's grace (mercy) and justice. Paragraph 27, as a counterweight focuses on man's response, which is to be humble:

*"Bona igitur humilitas quae liberat periclitantes, iacentes erigit. Novit eam ille qui dixit: ecce sum ego peccavi! Et ego pastor male feci, et isti in hoc grege, quid fecerunt? Fiat manus tua in me."*⁴⁰

³⁹ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 21.

⁴⁰ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 27. The quotation is from 2 Samuel 24.17. Ambrose's rendering differs from the Vulgate, which reads: "Ego sum qui peccavi ego inique egi isti qui oves sunt quid fecerunt vertatur obsecro manus tua contra me et contra domum patris mei."

[Therefore humility is good which sets free those who are in danger, which raises up those who have been cast down. He knew this humility who said: ‘Behold I am the one who has sinned! Even I, the shepherd, have acted wrongly, and these in this flock, what have they done? Let your hand be against me.’]

Ambrose’s citation of 2 Samuel 24.17 is telling. In this chapter, David attempts to take a census of Israel and Judah, an action that severely displeases God. God causes the nation to suffer famine and pestilence because of this. The prophet Gad comes to David and tells him what it is that he has done. The words of 2 Samuel 24.17 are David’s response to this, his penance. The theme of the prophet who confronts the sinful king was a continuing one in the relationship of Ambrose and Theodosius.⁴¹ Ambrose was constantly using this motif for rhetorical effect and does not hesitate to draw upon it one more time here in order to define, for all time, the nature of his relationship with the dead emperor. Politically speaking, however, it is important not to confuse a construct that had a Biblical precedent and that had currency in the fourth-century Empire with the less tidy realities of the relationship between the emperor and the bishop.

The citation from 2 Samuel leads directly into a discussion of Theodosius himself in paragraphs 28-32. The digression on grace, justice and humility (24-27) is now applied to Theodosius himself. Coming off of what was said in paragraph 27, it is hard to miss Ambrose’s point in paragraph 28. He begins,

“Et ideo quia humilem se praeibit Theodosius imperator, et tibi peccatum obrepsit veniam postulavit, conversa et anima eius in requiem suam, sicut habet Scriptura, quae dicit: *convertere anima mea in requiem tuam, quia Dominus benefecit tibi.*”⁴²

[And likewise, since the Emperor Theodosius showed himself to be humble, and when sin crept in he sought forgiveness, and his soul has turned to its rest, just as Scripture has it, which says: ‘return unto thy rest, O my soul; for the LORD hath dealt bountifully with thee.’]

⁴¹ For another important example of this, see below, pp. 38-39.

⁴² Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 28. The citation is of Psalm 114.7. The translation of the psalm is from the Authorized Version.

Here Ambrose gives his audience a more direct reference to Theodosius' penance after the massacre at Thessalonika. Having worked so hard to create a usable Theodosius, who is humble, loving and faithful, we begin to see how the bishop puts it to use in defining the nature of their relationship: Ambrose plays Gad (or Nathan, depending upon which passage one cites) to Theodosius' David.⁴³ The section closes (30-32) with Theodosius at rest as a reward for all of his labors.

Beginning with paragraph 33, Ambrose changes the course of his oration. Up to this point, he has focused upon delivering an encomium for Theodosius built around Psalm 114.1. Now he goes in a different direction, setting up, in effect, a mirror-image of what he has done heretofore. Paragraphs 33-38 invert the "I have loved" statements of paragraphs 17-23. This time, the statement is taken to refer to Ambrose's love for Theodosius. All of the ideas that Ambrose has painstakingly developed in paragraphs 12 through 32 are brought to fruition and applied – beginning with paragraph 33 which nicely sums up the Theodosius that Ambrose has worked so hard to create.

"...dilexi virum misericordem, humilem in imperio, corde puro, et pectore mansueto praeditum, qualem Dominus amare consuevit, dicens: supra quem requiescam nisi supra humilem et mansuetum?"⁴⁴

[I have loved a merciful man, humble in his rule, endowed with a pure heart, and with a mild conscience, of such a kind as the Lord is accustomed to love, saying: Upon whom shall I rest unless upon the humble and gentle?]

After setting these boundaries for what is to follow, Ambrose moves into a set of applications wherein he interprets some of the emperor's actions in light of what he has already said. First, he mentions Theodosius' attitude when he did penance before Ambrose at the cathedral in Milan.

⁴³ For a similar use of this motif, where Ambrose plays Nathan, see below pp. 38-39.

⁴⁴ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 33; cf. Isaiah 66.2.

He then cites Theodosius' refusal to partake of the Eucharist immediately after the battle at Frigidus. Third, Theodosius kept asking (according to Ambrose) for Ambrose as he was dying.⁴⁵ Finally, Ambrose claims that Theodosius was more concerned about the condition of the Church than about his own trials. In each of these episodes, however brief, Ambrose portrays Theodosius in a way that is fully consistent with the virtues that he has stressed thus far.

First and foremost among these incidents, and the one that can be taken as most representative of Ambrose's interpretive strategy, is Theodosius' public penance before Ambrose in the bishop's cathedral. In the *De obitu*, Ambrose has this to say about the incident:

“Dilexi virum qui magis arguentem quam adulantem probaret. Stravit omne quo utebatur insigne regium, deflevit in ecclesia publice peccatum suum, quod ei aliorum fraude obrepserat, gemitu lacrymis oravit veniam. quod privati erubescunt non erubuit Imperator, publice agere poenitentiam neque ullus postea dies fuit quo non illum doleret errorem.”⁴⁶

[I have loved a man who would commend one who would reprove rather than one who would flatter. He strewed on the ground every insignia of the kingship that he was using, he wept publicly in the church for his own sin, which crept in upon him by means of the treachery of others, he sought forgiveness by groaning and tears. That which private citizens blush at, the emperor was not ashamed of (that is, to do penance in public) nor was there any day thereafter in which he did not lament that sin.]

In the context of the oration, this description fits the image of Theodosius that Ambrose has been consistently building since the outset. Nevertheless, these are quite significant actions for an emperor to take. Ambrose says that Theodosius “wept publicly” (*deflevit in ecclesia publice*) and that he was not shy about it (*quod private erubescunt non erubuit*). How far, though, should one accept Ambrose's version of Theodosius' mental and emotional state on that day in the cathedral? Seen through the lens of politics, it was still all to Theodosius' advantage to make a good show of penance before Ambrose's congregation. From Ambrose's perspective, as he

⁴⁵ Cf. the exact same claim made by Ambrose in the *de ob. Val.* 80.

⁴⁶ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 34.

relates the incident here, Theodosius displayed all of the virtues that Ambrose has attributed to him: mercy, humility, pure-heartedness and a gentle disposition. Regardless of his actual feelings at the time, the emperor was penitent before the bishop. That, above every other consideration, was of paramount importance for Ambrose.

Theodosius' funeral eulogy was not the first occasion that Ambrose took to address this event. To understand what Ambrose is doing in this portion of the oration, it will be helpful to read *Ep. 51* in tandem with the oration itself. It will also be important to remember that, as with the *De obitu Theodosii*, we should be extremely careful about taking the text at face value. This is not a "private document," pulled from the personal papers of the deceased bishop. Instead, it is a highly polished literary production, intended and edited for publication in the manner of Pliny's letters.⁴⁷ Furthermore, a different approach is required. Instead of looking backward and interpreting Ambrose's actions in hindsight, as much as possible each document should be read looking straight on, interpreting it in its particular historical context and striving not to read into it the interpretations that accrued to it in later years. Turning to the letter itself, one can begin to delineate the development of Ambrose's interpretation of this particular event. This letter is perhaps the closest that one can come to the reality of the situation. But it reads differently from the later evidence, specifically the *De obitu Theodosii*.

Epistle 51 is from Ambrose, addressed to Theodosius, and dated to September of the year 390.⁴⁸ It concerns the massacre that took place at Thessalonika during the summer of 390. It is easy, and indeed it has traditionally been the practice, to read the letter in strictly pastoral terms: Ambrose the bishop is urging Theodosius, the dutiful parishioner, to repent and to come back into communion with the Church. In support of this, Ambrose adduces the story of Nathan's

⁴⁷ Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (London: Routledge, 1997), 64-65. Cf. McLynn, xvi-xvii.

⁴⁸ For the date of the letter, which is disputed yet not particularly relevant for our purposes, see footnote 1 in the Beyenka edition of Ambrose's epistles, pg. 20.

rebuke of King David in 2 Samuel 12. This reading, however, ignores the nature of imperial power and the political maneuvering that undergirded the interaction between emperor and bishop.⁴⁹ Seen through this lens, the story changes shape somewhat.

At the time that this letter was written, Ambrose was in a much weaker position than we might imagine: he is under suspicion at court for leaking sensitive information and appears to have a reputation as a conniver (*et quasi conniventis famam subibo*).⁵⁰ He is dealing with an emperor who is very jealous of his imperial prerogatives, who will not brook any interference, real or perceived, in matters of state. Ambrose's actions had brought the wrath of Theodosius down upon him.⁵¹ But Ambrose had not exhausted his techniques of persuasion quite yet.

First, Ambrose introduces a number of Biblical *exempla* which he uses as leverage, seeking to gain some sort of episcopal authority over the emperor. The chief model of royal comportment is David, who is cited on three occasions.⁵² Ambrose uses shame as a means of persuasion, citing the shame that David felt after he was confronted by the prophet Nathan regarding the murder of Uriah the Hittite. He also cites David's contrition when he was confronted by the prophet Gad regarding the census that he had attempted to carry out in Israel and Judah. Finally, there was David's sorrow when Abner, the captain of Saul's army, was killed by Joab, David's own general.⁵³ Saul and Job are also cited as models of contrition

⁴⁹ McLynn, 323, notes, "Theodosius, so much of whose work as emperor consisted of making carefully stylized public appearances, cannot but have been aware of these spectators [i.e. the members of Ambrose's congregation]. If any perspective upon the affair is to be privileged, it is theirs: we must therefore ask how they would have regarded the spectacle of their Augustus abasing himself before them."

⁵⁰ Ambr. Ep. 51.2. Cf. the discussion of the circumstances surrounding this in McLynn, 298ff.

⁵¹ Ambr. Ep. 51.4: "...si quis stimulet, in majus exsuscitas, ut eum revocare vix possis. Utinam si nemo mitigat, nullus accendat! Libenter eum committo tibi: *ipse te revocas, et pietatis studio vincis impetum naturae.*" (italics mine)

⁵² See also pg. 35 above.

⁵³ Cf. 2 Samuel 3.

suitable for Theodosius' edification.⁵⁴ Again and again, Ambrose sees his relationship with the emperor in terms of the models he finds in Scripture.

There is also the use of "grief" and "anxiety" on Ambrose's part as a rhetorical cover for his aims.⁵⁵ To this end, he also utilizes a posture of pleading.⁵⁶ The careful language and the pleading tone are fully consistent with someone who is seeking to *regain* the ear of the emperor, not so much someone who *already has* his ear. But there are threats as well; Ambrose warns Theodosius that he will withhold the Eucharist from him until he repents. This perhaps is Ambrose's chief weapon and he uses it to its fullest effect.⁵⁷ Finally, there is the element of confidentiality, which is employed to strengthen the other rhetorical techniques – "grief," pleading and threats – that the bishop is using.⁵⁸ When this letter is seen in the light of what Ambrose is trying to do in the *De obitu Theodosii*, some similarities and some important differences emerge. One sees the same use of Biblical *exempla* to prove points, as well as a large array of rhetorical strategies. These tools, however, are deployed in an entirely different fashion. Gone is the give-and-take, the urgency, of political struggle. That is replaced by the careful and unhurried construction of an emperor who looks nothing like the one seen in *Epistle 51*.

Returning now to the *De obitu*, in paragraphs 39 and 40, Ambrose depicts Theodosius in heaven with the *principes Christiani*: Constantine, Gratian, Helena and the deceased members of his own immediate family (e.g. his father and his first wife, Flacilla).⁵⁹ Following the discussion of Theodosius' actions while alive, Ambrose completes the image with a description of

Theodosius in heaven as he is greeted by the key representatives of the Christian Empire. As

⁵⁴ Ambr. *Ep.* 51.10.

⁵⁵ Ambr. *Ep.* 51.12, 14.

⁵⁶ Ambr. *Ep.* 51.12: "Suadeo, rogo, hortor, admoneo..."

⁵⁷ Ambr. *Ep.* 51.11: "Peccatum non tollitur nisi lacrymis et poenitentia."

⁵⁸ On confidentiality, see Ambr. *Ep.* 51.14: "Postremo scribo manu mea, quod *solus* legas." Also, Ambr. *Ep.* 51.5: "Hunc ego impetum malui cogitationibus tuis *secreto* committere, quam meis factis *publice* fortassis movere." (italics mine)

⁵⁹ Cf. pg. 26 and note 14.

was stated earlier, the emperor's *adventus* into heaven is especially significant because it provides legitimacy to both him and his successor(s). The contrast between legitimacy and usurpation is emphasized here by Ambrose's citation of Maximus and Eugenius – usurpers who are in hell because of their attempts to overthrow the lawful emperor.⁶⁰ Moreover, it should be pointed out that Ambrose depicts a very orthodox heaven – Valentinian I and II, Constantius II, and Valens do not appear in this paradise.

Paragraphs 41-51 contain a lengthy digression on Helena, the mother of the emperor Constantine. At first glance, it is not immediately apparent why Ambrose chooses to spend so much time on such a seemingly unrelated topic. Nevertheless, some important points are made here that give further insight into Ambrose's picture of Theodosius. Helena, as Ambrose relates, was the “hostess of an inn” (*stabulariam hanc*), who caught the eye of Constantius Chlorus, the emperor Constantine's father, and who was later married to him. She undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land for the purpose of locating the True Cross.⁶¹ According to Ambrose, she was guided by the Holy Spirit to the exact location of the Cross. When she found it,

“Lignum refulsit et gratia micuit, et quia iam feminam visitaverat Christus in Maria, Spiritus in Helena visitavit.”⁶²

[The wood glittered and grace flashed forth. And, since already Christ had visited a woman in Mary, so the Spirit visited a woman in Helena.]

There was, moreover, a divine purpose in this visitation:

“Visitata est Maria ut Evam liberaret; visitata est Helena ut imperatores redimerentur.”⁶³

[Mary was visited so that she might set Eve free; Helena was visited so that emperors might be redeemed.]

⁶⁰ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 39: “contra autem Maximus et Eugenius in inferno...”

⁶¹ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 42.

⁶² Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 46.

⁶³ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 47.

Ambrose sets Helena and her son Constantine in the context of the salvific drama that is at the center of the Christian view of history, spanning time from Adam and Eve (the great Fall) to Mary and Jesus (Incarnation and Atonement) down to Helena and Constantine, the redeemers of the Roman world.⁶⁴ This understanding indicates that, for Ambrose, there is the sense that he is living in Biblical times, that the events which he is discussing are really only a natural extension of what he has read in Scripture. Thus, Theodosius can be David, Helena can be Mary, and Constantine can be a new Christ-figure. In essence, Helena is understood as the mother who, by giving birth to Constantine, birthed the Christian Empire of Ambrose and Theodosius' day. In this sense, she is "the mother of all living," because the Roman world is now a Christian Empire.⁶⁵ According to Ambrose, the value of Helena's expedition for the True Cross lay chiefly in its results. She found the nails with which Christ was crucified at the site. With one nail she had a diadem made, with the other a bridle. Ambrose explains this information in two different ways. First, the nail/diadem represents the Roman authority that originally killed Christ. In the hands of Christian emperors, the nail (which Helena had turned into a diadem) has again become a symbol of authority whereby critics of Christianity (Jews and heretical sects [cf. section 49]) can be silenced. Second, the nail/bridle represents imperial restraint.

"Sed quaero: quare sanctum super fraenum, nisi ut imperatorum insolentiam refraenaret, comprimeret licentiam tyrannorum, qui quasi equi in libidines adhinnerent quod liceret illis adulteria impune committere?"⁶⁶

[But I ask: Wherefore was there anything holy about the bridle, unless so that it might rein in the insolence of emperors, so that it might check the licentiousness of rulers, who, as though they were horses, crave lustful pleasures that it might be permitted to them to commit adultery without penalty?]

⁶⁴ See, in the NT, Romans 5 and Galatians 3.

⁶⁵ Genesis 3.20.

⁶⁶ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 50.

Ambrose refers to it as a “bridle of devotion and faith” (*fraena devotionis et fidei*) which every emperor, with the explicit exception of Julian, took upon themselves. In the end, Helena’s divinely-approved mission imputed divine sanction upon the fourth-century empire and upon each of the Christian emperors, a reality that Ambrose could tap into as a source of legitimacy. Even though Theodosius and his sons were not blood descendants of Helena or Constantine, through the imagery of the diadem and bridle, Ambrose could very easily make this connection, following very nicely upon the discussion of the *principes Christiani* in paragraph 40.

In paragraph 52, Gratian and Theodosius are again depicted in Heaven. They are set apart by their goodness and their love of pardon. Indeed, they lead the procession of all of the other princes in Heaven. This is a continuation of their portrayal in paragraphs 39 and 40, where they embraced one another as brothers and as “two good and generous exponents of devotion.”⁶⁷ McLynn notes that Gratian, in these passages, is effusive in his greeting of Theodosius, as compared to the modest reception that he gave to Valentinian II in the *De obitu Valentiniani*. But despite that difference, in both orations, Gratian, as “the last wholly respectable ruler of the western provinces,” lends credibility and legitimacy to the deceased: first, to Valentinian, whose orthodoxy was suspect – not to mention the fact that he had died unbaptized and as the result of an alleged suicide – and second, to Theodosius, providing necessary legitimacy to an Eastern emperor, one of whose sons now sought the western throne.⁶⁸ Once again, Ambrose’s primary focus is upon the rhetorical construction of a usable Theodosius, one that will further the goal of legitimacy and imperial continuity with respect to Theodosius’ two young sons. It matters little

⁶⁷ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 39: “*illic bonus uterque et pietatis interpres largus misericordiae suae consortio delectantur...*” (italics mine)

⁶⁸ McLynn, 339, 359.

in this instance just how well Gratian and Theodosius got along when they were alive, which in fact was not all that well.⁶⁹

This section closes with Theodosius at rest in paragraph 53. This section is parallel with section 32 and serves the same purpose, closing off a division of the speech. This time, however, Theodosius' rest is buffered by the Biblical *exemplum* of Lazarus.⁷⁰ Ambrose notes that Lazarus "carried a heavy yoke from his youth."⁷¹ Theodosius too,

"portavit iugum grave...a iuventate, quando insidiabantur eius saluti qui patrem eius triumphatorem occiderant. Portavit iugum grave, quando subiit pietatis exsilium, quando infuses Romano imperio barbaris suscepit imperium. Portavit iugum grave ut tyrannos Romano dimoveret imperio..."⁷²

[...carried a heavy yoke...from youth, when those who killed his victorious father plotted against his well-being. He carried a heavy yoke, when he entered exile because of his loyalty, when, with barbarians pouring into the Roman Empire, he sustained the state. He carried a heavy yoke so that he might disperse usurpers in the Roman realm.]

The comparison is strained, though, because Ambrose subsumes the "real" Theodosius into the construct that he has worked so hard to create in this oration. He largely ignores the actual circumstances that surrounded each of these events, choosing rather to re-interpret them in a more pious light. So, Theodosius becomes a man of suffering and misfortune just like Lazarus in the Gospel of Luke. He also rests in Heaven, just as Lazarus does.⁷³

Ambrose and Honorius: The Role of the Bishop in the Post-Theodosian Empire

Finally, Ambrose's funeral eulogy provides a roadmap to the future, Ambrose's future, that is. In what ways does Ambrose insert himself into imperial politics and hierarchy in order to establish a role for himself at the court of Honorius similar to the one he played (or tried to play)

⁶⁹ McLynn, 359.

⁷⁰ Luke 16.20ff.

⁷¹ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 53: "Portavit iugum grave a iuventute sua Lazarus pauper..."

⁷² Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 53.

⁷³ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 53: "sed quia hic in labore, ibi in requie."

for Theodosius? Does the position of Stilicho relate to this question? What is his significance for Ambrose's own ambitions? Paragraphs 54-56, the closing paragraphs of the oration, provide insight into these questions.

This section returns directly to the scene at hand: in Ambrose's cathedral with Honorius and other members of the royal family, along with a host of army officers and imperial officials, gathered to hear the bishop speak. Ambrose addresses Honorius directly here; he has been laying the groundwork for what he says throughout the entire oration. From the lofty heights of eloquence that the eulogy for Theodosius attained, Ambrose now returns to matters that are more mundane. The basic structure of this last section is built around the burial ritual for Theodosius: there is a discussion of the transportation of the body (54), of who will accompany the body (55), and of the triumphal return of the body to Constantinople and its interment (56). Ambrose is also concerned here, rhetorically, to tie up all of the loose ends and bring the speech to an effective conclusion. To that end, the important themes from the opening paragraphs of the *De obitu* will be reiterated.

Paragraph 54 begins with a discussion of the transportation of the body of Theodosius. Ambrose speaks of Honorius' weeping, connecting the end of the oration with the beginning, when Theodosius' death was "bemoaned" (*defleret*) and "lamented" (*conclamavimus*).⁷⁴ Similarly, Ambrose also returns to the same Biblical *exemplum* of Jacob and Joseph that he cited at the beginning (3-4). This time it is adduced to serve the consolatory purpose of the oration, to assuage their fears about the long journey of the emperor's body back to Constantinople. These fears reveal not only a pious desire that a family member be properly buried but also a concern that the honor of the family and legitimacy and authority of the successors of Theodosius be

⁷⁴ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 54: "*Fles, Honori, germen augustum, et lacrymis pium testificaris affectum, quod inhonorum adhuc honore tumuli patris corpus per spatia multa transmittis* (italics mine)."

maintained. Ambrose reassures Honorius and his audience with respect to these very concerns using the example of Jacob:

“...atque ibi defunctus ad sepulcrum patrum per aliquot dies, filio prosequente, deductus est. Nec derogatum est aliquid meritis eius, sed magis accessit ad laudem, quod pro suis carens debitae domus sorte, quodam supremi funeris peregrinabatur exsilio.”⁷⁵

[...and then having died he was led to the grave of his fathers after several days, with his son escorting him. Nothing was taken away from his merits, but rather it led to his praise, since (by fate) he lacked the home that was his by right (on account of his own children), he traveled as a stranger by means of a kind of exile even after his final end.]

Ambrose then turns his attention to the question of who will accompany the body of Theodosius on its eastward journey. Again, there is mention of Honorius weeping and Ambrose is quick to say that he shares in the boy's sorrow.⁷⁶ From consolation, the bishop moves into political advice, of which he has plenty to give. According to Ambrose, Honorius should not attempt to escort the body of his father to Constantinople, despite his feelings of filial piety. The trip would be too long and his own well-being might be endangered.⁷⁷ The bishop recognizes the young boy as a political novice who is capable of being influenced and who needs the advice of experienced elders. One can assume that Ambrose believes himself to be quite well-qualified for such a position. He further emphasizes the point by asserting that Honorius' obligation is no longer to his father but to the Roman people. Ambrose tried very hard, as was discussed earlier, to fill the role of advisor to Honorius' father. As is clear from this oration, from his published correspondence, and (later) from Paulinus' biography of him, Ambrose tried to construct his relationship with Theodosius in terms of the models provided by the prophets in the Hebrew

⁷⁵ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 54.

⁷⁶ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 55: “Fles etiam Imperator auguste quod non usque Constantinopolim reverendas reliquias ipse prosequeris. Eadem tibi causa nobiscum est.”

⁷⁷ Ambr. *de ob. Theod.* 55: “Nec hoc quidem tibi laboriosum nisi te teneret respublica, quam boni imperatores et parentibus et filiis praetulerunt.”

Bible, the most often recurring example being that of the prophet Nathan and King David. Now that Theodosius is dead, Ambrose cannot but be thinking of what role he is to play in this new and uncertain political configuration. This final passage of exhortation seems to be his attempt to establish for himself with Honorius the kind of role that he wanted so desperately to play with Theodosius. As such, he is very careful to identify his own desires with those of the young emperor.

The final paragraph of the oration (56) is centered on the triumphant return to Constantinople and interment of Theodosius' body. In describing this, Ambrose draws upon personifications of Italy (*Italia*) and Constantinople (*Constantinopolis*), portrayed as women, perhaps sisters, who are both grateful to Theodosius for the glories that he brought the Empire and who are both solicitous for the safety of his body. This is slightly different from the pairing of Roma and Constantinopolis that was emerging during the latter half of the fourth century, but serves some of the same purposes.⁷⁸ The centerpiece of this paragraph is the play between an earthly and a heavenly *adventus* for Theodosius. On the one hand, Constantinople, which had sent her emperor out to battle, was expecting him to return for "triumphal celebrations" (*triumphales solemnitates*) and "tokens of victories" (*titulos victoriarum*). On the other hand, in a curious mixture of political reality and other-worldliness, Theodosius' body is transported to Constantinople for burial, accompanied, not by the standard military and senatorial escorts, but by "choirs of angels" (*angelorum caterva*) and a "crowd of saints" (*sanctorum turba*). Constantinople itself, the destination of the body, becomes the heavenly city, Jerusalem (cf. 31).⁷⁹ Furthermore, Constantinople is equated with "paradise" and the "celestial city" in that she

⁷⁸ Sabine G. MacCormack, "Roma, Constantinopolis, the Emperor, and His Genius," *Classical Quarterly* 25 (May 1975), 147.

⁷⁹ MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony*, 146. See also, MacCormack, "Roma," 149.

will now possess the body of a “citizen of paradise” (*paradisi incolam*) and a “dweller of the celestial city” (*habitorem supernae illius civitatis*).

Conclusions

Central to the whole problem of the political relationships at Milan during the weeks and months following the death of Theodosius was his very lengthy shadow. To achieve success in the aftermath of Theodosius’ death, one had to be able to harness successfully the image of Theodosius. There were many individuals who were attempting to do this. Ambrose’s *De obitu Theodosii* represents one of those efforts. It creates a particular image of Theodosius and uses that image to advance the bishop’s specific political goals. As was stated earlier, there appear to be three goals that Ambrose is actively pursuing in the *De obitu*. First, Ambrose wants to help stabilize the Empire in the wake of Theodosius’ death. Second, he wants to praise Theodosius for his virtues and, by doing so, help to cement the legitimacy of his sons, who will succeed him. Third, he wants to establish his own place in the new post-Theodosian order, in whatever form that new order may take. Ambrose achieves these goals by crafting an image of Theodosius, and of the situation at hand, that addresses the concerns of all interested parties – the sons of the dead emperor, the army and the commanders, especially Stilicho. But as to the main question that I am asking: what about Stilicho? The *De obitu* is not, first and foremost, a speech either for or against Stilicho – Ambrose has larger goals in mind. So, any “endorsement” of the general that might be found in this oration must be understood in the larger context of these goals. In light of these goals, it is fairly clear that Ambrose understood that the future prosperity of Honorius and Arcadius lay in the loyalty of the army. Furthermore, Ambrose subsumes what he says about Stilicho into an exhortation to the army. So a statement of commendation for Stilicho could simply be seen as contributing to the overall goal of gaining the army’s loyalty. In short, I do not

believe that the idea that Ambrose's statement was an unqualified endorsement of Stilicho as a leader and of his (potential) policies can be derived from this text.

CHAPTER 4

AMBROSE AND STILICHO IN PAULINUS OF MILAN

There were two years between the delivery of the *De obitu Theodosii* and the death, at Easter 397, of Ambrose. During this time, there was continued interaction between Stilicho and Ambrose in and around the imperial court at Milan. In the previous chapter, I sought to demonstrate that the primary goal of Ambrose's funeral oration for Theodosius was not to bring his audience any closer to the actual person of Theodosius. Rather, his purpose was to provide them with a construct of the late emperor that was suited to meet the immediate needs of the empire (or, more precisely, what Ambrose understood those needs to be). This chapter, likewise, will focus upon a single work and its construction of particular individuals. Paulinus of Milan's *Vita Sancti Ambrosii* contains four distinct episodes in which Stilicho and Ambrose come into direct or indirect contact. In each of these episodes, I will examine what can be learned about the "real" Stilicho or the "real" Ambrose. Moving beyond this question, I will then turn to Paulinus' construction of these individuals and the contexts in which they appear. It is here, at the level of rhetoric and construct, that the value of the *Vita Sancti Ambrosii* will be found: not in what it says about the Bishop of Milan or Honorius' regent, but what it says about Paulinus and the context in which the work was written.

There is, however, a great deal of groundwork that must be laid before I can address specific episodes. I believe that there are at least two levels of filters through which the work of Paulinus must pass in order to be interpreted accurately. First, there is the filter of historical setting. By this, I do not primarily mean the historical context of the period from 395 to 397, but rather the historical setting of Paulinus' own work. To that end, I will examine the sources of this period for what they reveal about attitudes toward Stilicho and Ambrose. As will be seen,

all of these sources were written some time after the deaths of Ambrose and Stilicho; they reflect the effects of chronological distance upon events as well as the biases of their authors. This section will also include a discussion of the circumstances in which Paulinus' own work was composed.

A second filter is that of the literary setting of the *Vita Ambrosii*. Through this filter, I will examine the *V. Ambr.* as a literary creation. Under the rubric of literary setting, I will focus upon questions of genre and thematics. First, the question of genre. The *V. Ambr.* is an early representative of the evolving literary form of hagiography. The literary predecessors of the *V. Ambr.* display certain characteristics, primarily an interest in miracles and supernatural events, which the *V. Ambr.* itself shares. I will examine the ways in which Paulinus manipulates these received characteristics in constructing an Ambrose who fights against heresy and faces down the imperial authorities. Secondly, I will address the thematic components of the *V. Ambr.*. A close reading of the work reveals Paulinus' deep and persistent concern with certain themes: the Arian/Catholic conflict, the politics and theology of martyrdom, the miracles that Ambrose performed and Ambrose's relationship with various "men of power." I will spend some time delineating how these themes govern Paulinus' narrative and shape his interpretation of specific events in the life of Ambrose. Having established these parameters, both historical and literary, I will then turn, in the final section of this chapter, to the specific instances of interaction between Stilicho and Ambrose, placing them (I hope) in their proper context.

The Historical Setting

As stated earlier, the chief source of evidence for the interactions between Stilicho and Ambrose is Paulinus of Milan's *Vita Ambrosii*. But several other sources bear upon my subject as well: the *New History* of Zosimus, the *De reditu suo* of Rutilius Namatianus, Gerontius' *Life*

of *Melania the Younger*, pertinent letters from Symmachus, Augustine and Ambrose and legal evidence from the *Codex Theodosianus*. The nature of these sources will determine the kind of questions that one can ask about Stilicho and Ambrose. In the first instance, one might be tempted to ask: “What do these sources reveal about the interactions between Stilicho and Ambrose in this period and their relationship with one another during the last years of Ambrose’s life?” This is a good and straightforward question. Unfortunately, it is not one that can be answered with the sources available. That is because all of these sources were written many years after the deaths of both Stilicho (408) and Ambrose (397). As such, not only do they suffer from the distance of years but they also reflect the biases of those who wrote them, especially with regard to Stilicho.

A) Stilicho

Stilicho was, to put it mildly, a polarizing figure. He had ruled in the West for almost thirteen years at the time of his fall from favor and death in August 408. When he died, numerous accusations and theories were floating about regarding who he was and what his goals had been. These accusations are preserved in contemporary historical and literary sources; they reflect a wide range of perspectives – almost all negative. After his fall, Stilicho was an easy target for whoever wished to attack him. No matter the perspective from which a particular author is writing, Stilicho appears as a foil for all that that author considers wrong with the world.

Pagan critiques. Anti-Stilichonian polemic usually grew out of one of a group of concerns: religious, political, ethnic or financial. I recognize, to begin with, that these divisions are somewhat artificial: in the mind of a late antique writer, these concerns would have been, to one degree or another, intertwined. For my purposes, however, it will be useful to look at each

“category” of polemic separately. Quite often, Stilicho was attacked on religious grounds, with authors using the standard language of contemporary anti-Christian or anti-pagan religious polemic. Pagan writers, such as Zosimus and Rutilius Namatianus, considered Stilicho to be hyper-Catholic. Zosimus was a court official who lived around the year 500 and who wrote a work recounting the fall of Rome (which he believed took place with the sack of the city in 410), called the *Nea Historia*. He was, according to Evagrius, a pagan and throughout the *NH*, he blames the fall of Rome on its abandonment of the traditional gods.¹ Zosimus is the only source for two stories that preserve a pagan outlook on Stilicho.² In the first story, he recounts an incident in which Serena, Stilicho’s wife, entered a temple of Cybele and defaced an image of Rhea in the temple by removing an ornamental necklace on the statue of the goddess and wearing it herself. A Vestal Virgin upbraided Serena for her act of impiety and she in turn hurled abuse at the Vestal and ordered her attendants to drive her away.³ Zosimus and his main source in this section of the *New History*, Olympiodorus, construct this story in terms of its significance as an act of impiety.⁴ Zosimus sandwiches the story about Serena between clear moral pronouncements about impiety toward the gods and the vengeance of Justice: “she was all

¹ Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.40. For citation, see Walter Goffart, “Zosimus, The First Historian of Rome’s Fall,” *The American Historical Review* 76.2 (April 1971): 416, n. 22.

² Zosimus’ attitude toward Stilicho is complicated by the attitudes of the sources – Eunapius and Olympiodorus – that he was using. “It is generally agreed that in Zosimus’ *New History* chapters 1.47-5.25 are little more than a summary of Eunapius, while 5.26-6.13 summarise Olympiodorus ... Moreover while following Eunapius, he adopted Eunapius’ extremely hostile portrayal of Stilicho, but from 5.26 he takes over the much more judicious and altogether more favourable view of Olympiodorus who is critical of Stilicho’s and his wife Serena’s impiety toward the gods, but respects his statesmanship.” Wolf Liebeschütz, “Pagan Historiography and the Decline of the Empire,” in *Greek and Roman Historiography in Late Antiquity: Fourth to Sixth Century A.D.*, ed. Gabriele Marasco (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 206-207. See also, J.F. Matthews, “Olympiodorus of Thebes and the History of the West, 407-425,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 60 (1970): 82.

³ This story and the following one (i.e. Stilicho’s stripping of the doors of the Capitol) are found at Zos. 5.38.2-5.

⁴ It should be noted here that Olympiodorus’ history, like that of Zosimus, is not contemporary with Stilicho (it was published *ca.* 425).

the same justly punished for her impieties.”⁵ The charge that Christians were disrespectful toward the traditional gods of the Roman state and that they would be punished for their disrespect was the most often repeated accusation found in anti-Christian polemic. Zosimus builds upon the charge in his second story involving Stilicho. According to Zosimus, Stilicho ordered the doors of the Capitol in Rome, which were overlaid with gold, to be stripped. When the doors were defaced, the workers discovered an inscription that read *misero regi servantur*. Zosimus claims that this inscription was fulfilled by the manner of Stilicho’s death. The impiety of Stilicho resulted in the death that he so richly deserved. These incidents are difficult to date with precision, but they certainly demonstrate what Zosimus (and, to some extent, Olympiodorus and Eunapius) thought of Stilicho and Serena, which would have in turn encapsulated the opinions of a large segment of the population in Rome during the thirteen years of Stilicho’s ascendancy.⁶

The other chief critic of Stilicho from a pagan perspective is Rutilius Namatianus. Born into an aristocratic Gallo-Roman family, he served as *magister officiorum* (ca. 412) and *praefectus urbi* (ca. 414). His magnum opus, the *De reditu suo*, recounts his voyage, in 417, from Rome to Gaul, where his estates had suffered from barbarian attacks. The extant portion of the poem contains a vicious attack upon Stilicho (who had, at this point, been dead for some nine years) located in Book 2. At the beginning of Book 2, Rutilius is praising the geography of Italy, the “queen of the world” (*Italiam rerum dominam*): he speaks of the Alps and the Apennines as

⁵ Zos. 5.38.2: δίκην δὲ τῶν εἰς τὰ θεία δέδωκε δυσσεζημάτων ἀξίαν. This sort of invective (i.e. the stealing of adornments from holy statuary) is a commonplace in contemporary sources, both pagan and Christian. Another implied criticism of Serena might be that she is greedy (blasphemy and greed go together in most sources), but Zosimus’ religiously motivated outrage at the vandalizing of a goddess’s statue is what comes through most clearly here.

⁶ Zosimus is unreliable on the dating of these events. See, first, Alan Cameron, “Theodosius the Great and the Regency of Stilicho” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 73 (1969): 247-280, who demonstrates that Zosimus was confused, in the Serena story, about when Theodosius had actually made a trip to Rome. According to

natural defenses for the peninsula (2.31-40). It is in this context that he introduces his invective against Stilicho. In light of the fact that the gods gave Italy these defenses and protected her from invasion, it is all the more bitter (*acerbum*) that Stilicho betrayed Italy. Rutilius alleges that he betrayed Italy in two ways: first, he actively sought to betray Rome to the Goths; second, he burned the Sibylline books.⁷ For Rutilius, the burning of the Sibylline books was the supreme act of impiety: these were the very oracles that Rome depended upon in times of crisis. Rutilius is the only source for this accusation, but there is good reason to accept that it actually happened. In a 1952 article, Émilienne Demougeot sets the destruction of the Sibylline books in the context of Stilicho's suppression of Jerome's *Commentariolus in Daniele*, which equated Rome with the fourth beast in Daniel 7.7-11.⁸ Couple this with the clear indications that the *De reditu suo* is, in part, a response to Augustine's *De civitate Dei* and it stands to reason that Rutilius would be very concerned with oracles of Rome's end and would revile someone who had destroyed them.⁹ Disturbed by texts that spoke of the end of the Empire (whatever their origin, pagan or Christian), Stilicho lashed out and destroyed them indiscriminately.¹⁰

Christian critiques. Christians also often accused Stilicho of religious impropriety of one sort or another. Augustine, in the autumn and winter of 408/409, was dealing with a serious civil disturbance in North Africa relating to the Donatist schism. In three letters (*Epp.* 97, 100 and 105) addressed to various civil officials, Augustine speaks of Stilicho and the anti-Donatist

Paschoud, Theodosius' trip to Rome took place in 389 and Stilicho's defacing of the Capitol in 408. See Francois Paschoud, ed. *Histoire nouvelle [par] Zosime*, vol. 3.1, (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1986), 264-265.

⁷ Stilicho's betrayal of Rome to the Goths: *De reditu suo* 2.46-47: "immisit Latiae barbara tela neci/ visceribus nudis armatum condidit hostem"; the burning of the Sibylline books: 2.52: "ante Sibyllinae fata cremavit opis."

⁸ Émilienne Demougeot, "Saint Jérôme, les Oracles Sibyllins et Stilicon," *Revue des Études anciennes* LIV (1952) : 84n.4.

⁹ Alan Cameron, "Rutilius Namatianus, St. Augustine, and the Date of the *De Reditu*," *Journal of Roman Studies* 57 (1967): 31-32.

¹⁰ Demougeot, "Saint Jérôme," 92.

measures that had originated from the court of Honorius.¹¹ These letters say little about Stilicho directly – but it is perhaps what they do not say that is more useful for my purposes. In *Ep.* 97, Augustine addresses Olympius, the new *magister officiorum* in the West, as “my excellent and rightly outstanding lord and son, who are worthy of much honor in the love of Christ.”¹² He then comes right to the point: “I also want to advise you to speed up your good work with much diligence and concern in order that the enemies of the Church may know that those laws which were sent to Africa concerning the destruction of idols and the correction of heretics when Stilicho was still alive, had been established by the will of the most pious and faithful emperor.”¹³ Augustine makes this claim because it was popularly believed that Stilicho was behind the anti-Donatist measures and that, since he had fallen from power, the laws were no longer in effect, thus leading to an upsurge in Donatist activity in late 408.¹⁴ In this claim, a very different image of Stilicho can be recovered: the image of an orthodox Christian whose measures against heresy were so closely affiliated with him that most people believed that they had lapsed upon his death. The problem, undoubtedly, with this image is that it does not fit Augustine’s purpose and thus has to be recast so as to avoid the appearance of giving credit to Stilicho. The other two letters (100 and 105) reinforce the point of *Ep.* 97, i.e. that the anti-Donatist laws remained in effect even after the death of Stilicho. In *Ep.* 100, addressed to Donatus, the proconsul of Africa, Augustine writes, “Meanwhile, let the Donatist heretics know right away by

¹¹ For events in North Africa in 408, see Erika T. Hermanowicz, “Catholic Bishops and Appeals to the Imperial Court: A Legal Study of the Calama Riots in 408,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12.4 (2004): 481-521. See also, W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: a movement of protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 261-274; and *Concilia Africae, Registri Ecclesiae Carthaginensis Excerpta* 106 (CCL 149:219).

¹² August. *Ep.* 97.1.

¹³ August. *Ep.* 97.2.

¹⁴ “They deceitfully boast or rather choose to think that these laws were established without his [Honorius’] knowledge or against his will...” See also 97.3: “... you can most easily and ought quickly, as I said, to inform those foolish people whose salvation we are seeking, though they oppose this, that it was the son of Theodosius rather than Stilicho who had taken care to send the laws that were sent for the defense of the Church of Christ.”

an edict of Your Excellency that the laws issued against their error remain in effect, laws that they think and boast now have no force so that they need not, even in that way, spare us at all.”¹⁵

Other critical viewpoints. Other writers focused not on religion but rather on accusations of a purely political nature. Jerome, in *Ep.* 123, accuses Stilicho of treachery, alleging that he armed Rome’s enemies with the empire’s resources (*qui nostris contra nos opibus armavit inimicos*).¹⁶ Sozomen, in his church history, includes accusations of “having conspired against the emperors” to put his son on the throne, and of collusion with Alaric.¹⁷ At the instigation of Augustine, Paulus Orosius wrote and published (in 418) the *Historiae adversus paganos* (a history of the world down to his own time) in seven books.¹⁸ Stilicho first appears at 7.37 in the context of Orosius’ discussion of the accession of Honorius and Arcadius, following the death of Theodosius. Orosius takes the opportunity, as noted above, to accuse Stilicho of conspiring with the barbarians and of plotting to place his son, Eucherius, on the Eastern throne, which was a common accusation at this time. In 7.38, much of Orosius’ criticism of Stilicho is directed at his son Eucherius. On top of the accusation that Stilicho was planning to put the boy on the eastern throne, Orosius adds charges that are still more damning:

“Eucherium filium suum, sicut a plerisque traditur, iam inde Christianorum persecutionem a puero privatoque meditantem, in imperium quoquo modo substituere nitebatur.”¹⁹

[Stilicho was striving to put in power – in whatever way – his own son, Eucherius, who was planning from boyhood and in private the persecution of Christians, just as it is handed down by many writers.]

¹⁵ August. *Ep.* 100.2.

¹⁶ Jer. *Ep.* 123.16.

¹⁷ Soz. *HE* 9.4. See also Philostorgius, 12.3 and Olympiodorus, frg. 6.

¹⁸ Much of this discussion is indebted to G. Zecchini, “Latin Historiography: Jerome, Orosius and the Western Chronicles,” in *Greek and Roman Historiography in Late Antiquity: Fourth to Sixth Century A.D.*, ed. Gabriele Marasco (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 317ff.

¹⁹ Orosius, *Hist.* 7.38.1.

The topic of Eucherius' religious goals comes up again later, when Orosius reports his assassination in late 408:

“Occisus Eucherius, qui ad conciliandum sibi favorem paganorum restitutione templorum et eversione ecclesiarum inbuturum se regni primordia minabatur.”²⁰

[Eucherius was killed, who had threatened from the beginning of his reign that he would bring about the restoration of the temples and the emptying of the churches for the purpose of courting the favor of the pagans for himself.]

Aside from the obvious problem of how Orosius could have known the thoughts (*a puero privatoque*) of the boy, this accusation diverts the reader from the pressing realities of Eucherius and Serena's situation in the autumn of 408: they would have been extremely vulnerable. In the aftermath of Stilicho's death, mother and son fled to Rome. Reading behind Orosius' statement, it seems that Eucherius and his mother came to Rome looking for support and protection; the carrot they offered was the re-establishment of freedom of worship (not necessarily, as Orosius implies, the active persecution of Christians). Eucherius' entreaties apparently did him no good: he was caught by two imperial eunuchs and executed.²¹ Ultimately, however, what is important is not the truthfulness of Orosius' accusation, but rather how widespread it was and how widely it was believed.

Anti-Stilichonian invective also included an element of the anti-barbarian rhetoric that was so pervasive in the political discourse of the late Roman West. Such rhetoric was a fundamental component of aristocratic identity, based on two primary motivations: political power and financial concerns. It defined for them not only who they were as aristocrats in terms of authority and status, but also what the Roman state should look like and for what purposes they should bestow their wealth upon the state. Particularly in the last eight to twelve months of Stilicho's regency, it is clear that the senatorial aristocracy was jealous of his position and power.

²⁰ Orosius, *Hist.* 7.38.6.

Their anger was compounded by their resentment at the monetary outlays that were required of them by Stilicho for paying a subsidy to Alaric. In fact, they so despised the idea of raising the required 4000 pounds of gold that they preferred to go to war rather than pay the sum.²² These resentments were at the base of broader accusations, published in the weeks and months after his execution, that Stilicho had aided the crossing of the Rhine by the Germanic hordes on 31 December 406, that he was actively colluding with Alaric, and that he sought to betray the Empire to him.²³ It did not help that Stilicho was of Vandal origin: the Vandals were said to be “an unwarlike, greedy, treacherous, and crafty race.”²⁴

Thus, it is hardly surprising that Olympius, a functionary in the administration who owed his position to Stilicho, perceived Stilicho’s weaknesses to be opportunities and pounced. In doing so, he and his accomplices were able to pull off what Thomas Burns has called a “conservative revolution.”²⁵ They were able to capitalize upon aristocratic biases against “barbarians” in military and political authority as a springboard to power for themselves. But the perception that persistent anti-barbarian rhetoric created had little to do with the realities of the extensive Germanic presence in the Roman army and administration. This is especially the case with Stilicho. It is quite true that Stilicho was of mixed parentage, that he was a *semibarbarus*.²⁶ The suggestion and innuendo behind this accusation, however, were not consonant with reality: Stilicho had been, for some years, part of the imperial bureaucracy, holding a variety of military

²¹ Zos. 5.37.4.

²² Zos. 5.29.6.

²³ For the accusation that Stilicho had aided in the crossing of the Rhine, see Oros. *Hist.* 7.40.3. For collusion with Alaric, see above, pg. 57.

²⁴ Oros. *Hist.* 7.38.1: “Interea comes Stilico, Vandalorum inbellis avarae perfidae et dolosae gentis genere editus...”

²⁵ Thomas Burns, *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome: A Study of Roman Military Policy and the Barbarians, ca. 375-425 A.D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 218.

²⁶ According to Claudian, Stilicho’s father was a Vandal (*De cons. Stil.* 1.35-39; cf. Oros. *Hist.* 7.38.1 and John of Antioch, frg. 187). His mother was a Roman (cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 123.16, who calls Stilicho a *semibarbarus*).

and civil posts both under Theodosius and during his years as guardian of Honorius.²⁷ He was, even if there had ever been a point when he was not, a fully Romanized imperial official, making charges of “barbarism” more a product of prevailing rhetoric than of reality.

But, if the charge was not true, what made it stick? First, the use of anti-barbarian rhetoric was so effective because of its sheer flexibility: “barbarian” was a label that could be pulled out and used when needed for maximum political effect and tucked away again when it was no longer needed. By this point in the history of the empire, the significance was purely political; it no longer served as a mere ethnic descriptor. Second, all of the fears of the senatorial aristocracy, their worries about retaining political power and the profitability of their estates, were wrapped up in their use of the term “barbarian.” The slow but steady upward filtration of Germanic soldiers into positions in the Western high command surely made them anxious about their long held dominance in affairs of state. Financial concerns were a major factor as well. As was mentioned earlier, when, in the early part of 408, Stilicho petitioned the Senate for the funds to pay a subsidy to secure peace with Alaric, it refused. This could be, and has been, interpreted as a purely selfish act on the part of an aristocratic elite who were only concerned with their own financial interests.²⁸ But the act seems to be driven, at least in part, by deeper fears: they resented being made to pay money to a “barbarian” (Alaric) by another “barbarian” (Stilicho) whose loyalties were already suspect. This resentment provided easy cover for their pre-existing tendencies toward tightfistedness and gave them even more ammunition against Stilicho. Finally, Stilicho sought to maintain peace on the imperial frontiers by way of maintaining the general policy of Theodosius toward the Germanic tribes (i.e. negotiation). In so doing, he had been in regular contact with Alaric, even to the point of arranging Alaric’s employment by the

²⁷ See *PLRE* 1, pg. 853ff. “Flavius Stilicho.”

western government to fight the usurper Constantine. Thus, it was the easiest thing in the world for Stilicho's political enemies, through a series of 'links and ties' to implicate him as being in league with peoples who were out to destroy Rome.

For all of these reasons, the historian must exercise great caution in using these sources to reconstruct Stilicho's career.

B) Ambrose

As with Stilicho, Ambrose's reputation took on a life of its own in the years after his death. His image was used for several purposes. One very popular one was that of the bishop who stood up to imperial authority and in whose presence rulers were cowed. The fifth-century ecclesiastical historians all make use of the story of Ambrose standing up to Theodosius, for example, often for a specifically didactic purpose.²⁹ It was a useful construct that served the Church well in coming years when certain emperors were hesitant to intervene on the "right" side of an ecclesiastical conflict. This construct can also be seen in Paulinus' *V. Ambr*, particularly in his account of the massacre at Thessalonika. Paulinus' account, which paints a picture of the event in the same tones and colors that Ambrose himself uses to describe the event (*Ep.* 51), places a great deal of emphasis on Ambrose's position of power in the exchange.³⁰ For Paulinus, it was important, for his overall picture of Ambrose, to create an Ambrose who was extremely influential in imperial politics as well as within the Church. The problem with this construct from an historian's point of view, however, is that it ignores the realities of Roman political life, the give and take of political maneuvering and the risks that Ambrose took in

²⁸ See the references given in Matthews, *Western Aristocracies*, 277n. 5. But, in contrast, Matthews notes that there was a great deal more complexity to the financial picture of the elite than this one act allows.

²⁹ Soz. *HE* 7.25, explicitly holds up Ambrose as an example. See also Theodoret, *HE* 5.13, 17. For a strikingly similar story of episcopal political influence, see the story of Gainas and John Chrysostom, at Theodoret, *HE* 5.32.

³⁰ A. Paredi, "Paulinus of Milan," *Sacris Erudiri* 14 (1963): 215.

attempting to play an active role at court. It is important, nevertheless, because it reveals the interests of those who created and utilized that construct.

Another post mortem image that was very influential was that of Ambrose as a man who possessed miraculous powers. Almost all of the saints' lives of the fourth and fifth centuries depict their subjects performing miracles. Given this, Paulinus' portrayal of an Ambrose who can strike people dead (*V. Ambr.* 11), raise people from the dead (*V. Ambr.* 28), and appear to people after his death (*V. Ambr.* 51) is not unusual. Moreover, this construct of Ambrose is not limited to Paulinus. One instance of Ambrose's magical powers had become widely known, at least in Africa, by the second decade of the fifth century: the story of Ambrose's appearance to Mascezel – after his death – is told in Orosius as well as Paulinus.³¹ This tradition of the “supernatural Ambrose,” however, was somewhat controversial, because these aspects of Paulinus' construct of Ambrose (to which I shall return below) were forged in the midst of controversy.

A third factor of great importance with respect to Ambrose's posthumous image was the Pelagian controversy. Paulinus was deeply involved in the Pelagian affair, which erupted when Pelagius and his followers arrived in North Africa in the aftermath of Alaric's sack of Rome in August 410. It was Paulinus, in fact, who had brought the first charges of heresy against Pelagius' disciple, Caelestius, in a *libellus* of 411.³² Additionally, Paulinus wrote another *libellus* (417) which, coupled with the support of Augustine and other African bishops, was instrumental in convincing the emperor Honorius to issue a rescript condemning Pelagius, Caelestius and their teachings. During the 410s, Augustine, with whom Paulinus had a close relationship, also took up the fight against the teachings of Pelagius, with the publication of his

³¹ Oros. *Hist.* 7.36.7-11; *V. Ambr.* 51. As noted above, the *Historiae* dates to 417/418, some five years before the likely date of the *V. Ambr.*

first anti-Pelagian works, the *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum* and the *De spiritu et littera*. These two works were only the beginning of a steady stream of anti-Pelagian treatises put out by Augustine over the ensuing twenty years. As a result of these polemical writings and the political maneuvering of Paulinus, Augustine and other Catholic bishops, Pelagius and Caelestius were condemned, first, by a synod convened at Rome by Zosimus, the bishop of Rome, and a bit later by an imperial rescript of 30 April 418.

Despite the official condemnation of the imperial court and of Zosimus, the new bishop of Rome, the teachings of Pelagius did not die. After 418, the Pelagian movement acquired a new leader, Julian of Eclanum, and a new focus. As the dispute grew during the early 420s, primarily between Augustine and Julian, and the arguments became more sophisticated, both sides turned to older authorities for support – Cyprian, Jerome, Hilary, and Ambrose, among others. Pelagius had quoted Ambrose often and approvingly.³³ Augustine did not begin to utilize extensive quotation of Ambrose until his *De gratia Christi et peccato originali* in 418.³⁴ After this point, though, Augustine's anti-Pelagian works contain a great deal of exposition of Ambrose's teachings against Pelagian interpretations of them; they constitute an effort to reclaim him for Catholic orthodoxy.³⁵ Augustine was trying to say that Pelagius' teaching is new, that Ambrose would not have recognized it. On the other hand, the Pelagians were constantly repeating the refrain that Augustine's doctrine of original sin originated with him. Julian quotes Ambrose (and Pelagius had as well) to this effect.³⁶ In large part, the argument between

³² Cf. August. *De gratia Christi et peccato originali* 2.3-7; *Praedestinatus* 1.88 (PL 53: 617-619).

³³ Instances could be multiplied. For a representative sample, see August. *De gratia Christi* 44.48 – 49.54 and *Contra Julianum* 1.7 (30).

³⁴ Paredi, 212.

³⁵ Esp. the *Opus imperfectum contra Julianum*.

³⁶ See above n. 33.

Augustine and Julian became an argument over the legacy of Ambrose – his writings as well as his life. There was a great deal at stake for Augustine in this argument, on many different levels.

As the argument escalated, Augustine seems to have realized the need for a life of Ambrose that would definitively show that he would not have condoned heresy of any sort. So, he wrote to Paulinus, who had been a deacon under Ambrose in the church at Milan, requesting that he write such a work.³⁷ Thus, the *V. Ambr.* was not written in a vacuum; it was meant to be a tool, a weapon, in Augustine's ongoing battle with Julian.³⁸ But for Augustine, the appeal to the authority of Ambrose was driven by much more complex motives than merely an attempt to prove that Pelagius' teaching was new. A *Vita Ambrosii* would serve other important purposes for Augustine. It would be designed to settle nagging questions of authority, i.e. the question of which side could lay claim to the considerable weight of Ambrose's legacy, and legitimacy (Augustine's). As noted above, quotation of Ambrose by Augustine increased markedly as the Pelagian controversy intensified. But, Augustine quotes him not for his views on the teachings of Pelagius and Julian – the controversy did not arise until well after Ambrose's death – but instead as a means to claim Ambrose for Catholic orthodoxy and, by extension, to establish a connection between himself and the orthodox tradition that Ambrose represented. This latter point is important because such a biography might also help lay to rest persistent questions about Augustine's own orthodoxy, namely that he was a "crypto-Manichee," charges that made Augustine extremely vulnerable in the midst of public controversy. Augustine was fighting off these accusations for most of his professional life. He needed to be able to point to Ambrose and

³⁷ Paulin. *V. Ambr.* 1.1

³⁸ Cf. Hägg and Rousseau's statement, "Biography is, from the start, a vehicle for ideas and for the embodiment of ideals, not – as some would have it – the poor relative of historiography, with historicity as its high but sadly unattainable goal." Hägg and Rousseau, *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pg. 4. See also, Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. xiv-xv.

say, “Look, I studied with him and was baptized by him. I *am too* orthodox!”³⁹ On a personal and a professional level, it was necessary for Augustine to establish this truth absolutely. It is easy to see, after considering all of these factors, just how much Augustine would have had at stake in the success of the *Vita Ambrosii* and his expectations of what it could do for him.

But something was lost between Augustine’s request and Paulinus’ execution of that request. Even a cursory reading of the *Vita Ambrosii* demonstrates that Augustine and Paulinus had two very different Ambroses in mind. Augustine’s idea of a bishop was very different from that of Paulinus: as noted above, in the *Confessiones* and elsewhere, Augustine speaks of a highly-educated, well-read and rhetorically polished bishop (*quam diserte diceret*) who was filled with compassion for his parishioners and was accessible to all who approached him.⁴⁰ For Augustine, Ambrose was just such a man: characterized by his *eloquentia* and his learnedness (*Conf.* 5.13.23-14.25). Augustine’s initial encounters with Ambrose were the first time Augustine had met a Christian who could address him on the level of the Neoplatonic intellectuals with whom he associated; here was a man who quoted Plotinus and spoke of the ascent of the soul (cf. *De Isaac vel anima*). Ambrose matched these qualities with his warmth and his affection for the young Augustine:

“Suscepit me paterne ille homo dei et peregrinationem meam satis episcopaliter dilexit. et eum amare coepi primo quidem non tamquam doctorem veri, quod in ecclesia tua prorsus desperabam, sed tamquam hominem benignum in me.”⁴¹

[That ‘man of God’ (2 Kings 1.9) received me like a father and expressed pleasure at my coming with a kindness most fitting in a bishop. I began to like him, at first indeed not as a teacher of the truth, for I had absolutely no confidence in your Church, but as a human being who was kind to me.]

³⁹ On Augustine’s attempts to defend himself: *Op. imp.* 1.24; 3.37; 6.8.

⁴⁰ Augustine’s description of Ambrose is found at *Conf.* 5.13-14. For a discussion of accessibility, see Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose*, pp.37-38.

⁴¹ August. *Conf.* 5.13.23. Eng. trans. from Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 88.

Paulinus, however, places much less – indeed, hardly any – emphasis upon these qualities; his Ambrose is more distant and meant, I think, to be more awe-inspiring. From the very beginning of the *V. Ambr.*, Paulinus is keen to emphasize the miraculous and the supernatural. Note that Paulinus’ very first story about Ambrose concerns the bees hovering over little Ambrose as a baby:

“Illud enim examen apum scriptorium ipsius nobis generabat favos, qui caelestia dona annuntiarent et mentes hominum de terrenis ad caelum erigerent.”⁴²

[For that swarm of bees produced for us the honeycombs of his writings, which would tell of heavenly gifts and raise the minds of human beings from earthly things to heaven.]

This is not to say that Augustine took no interest, or was completely put off by, the miraculous or supernatural. In the *Confessiones*, Augustine clearly believes in a God who can do anything. He reports, for instance, that he knew a girl in Milan who had been healed by touching a handkerchief that had touched the martyrdom of Protasius and Gervasius.⁴³ Possidius even reports that Augustine himself performed a miraculous healing, albeit one that took place at the very end of his life and with some reluctance on Augustine’s part.⁴⁴ But even so, Paulinus’ version of Ambrose is useless in the polemical context of the debate with Julian. Paulinus’ Ambrose is a “white-leather wearing Elvis-figure” who is constantly doing magic tricks.⁴⁵ This image ran completely counter to everything that Augustine was fighting for in the 410s and 420s. Augustine’s writings during this period are heavily intellectual: debates, treatises, letters to the imperial court and to the bishop of Rome, letters to parishioners and to prominent figures in the Latin West (Paulinus of Nola, Marcellinus, et al.). His polemics directed against Julian, despite the fact that they can be quite personal, are filled with careful exegesis of Scripture and

⁴² Paulin. *V. Ambr.* 3.

⁴³ August. *Conf.* 9.7.16.

⁴⁴ Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 29.

discussion of the questions at hand. The “magic tricks” of Paulinus were completely useless to him given this context and would potentially do more harm than good given the audience that Augustine had in mind. Paulinus’ Ambrose struck people dead, healed and cast out unclean spirits in the same way that any number of pagan holy men and magicians were doing all the time. How would Augustine’s intended audience – the Italian aristocracy (which enthusiastically supported Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum) and the churches of the Greek East – be able to tell which were good and which were evil?⁴⁶ How would they know whether Ambrose was merely a magician or, instead, the real thing? In short, Paulinus failed to make the necessary distinctions – his Ambrose would leave people wondering.

Our sources for the lives of Stilicho and Ambrose during the early and middle 390s do not place us very close to the men themselves. Instead, they often disclose more about the person writing than about either Stilicho or Ambrose. In light of this, just how close can we get to the “historical Stilicho” or the “historical Ambrose” in these sources? The answer: not very. It should be remembered, however, that the usefulness of these sources lies in what they say about the people who wrote them rather than in how close they get to their subjects.

The Literary Setting

Equally as important as the historical setting of the *Vita Ambrosii* is its literary setting. Key to the proper interpretation of the Ambrose of the *Vita Ambrosii* and, in turn, of the Stilicho/Ambrose episodes in the *V. Ambr.*, is an understanding both of how certain literary genres were evolving in late antiquity and how Paulinus helps shape their evolution or responds

⁴⁵ This image was suggested to me in a conversation with Dr. Erika Hermanowicz.

⁴⁶ For the reception of Pelagius in Italy, see Peter Brown, “Pelagius and his Supporters: Aims and Environment” and “The Patrons of Pelagius: The Roman Aristocracy between East and West,” in *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 183-226. For the audience of the debate between Julian and Augustine, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 415.

to the way they are being shaped by other authors. Furthermore, there are important rhetorical techniques and themes that Paulinus turns to repeatedly to advance his construction of Ambrose. This section will focus on these questions of genre and thematics in order to illuminate further the content of Paulinus' work.

A) Genre

The *Vita Ambrosii* is one of the earliest examples of the genre that came to be known as hagiography. Paulinus mentions his predecessors: Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, Jerome's *Life of Paul the Hermit*, and Severus' *Life of St. Martin of Tours*. It is anachronistic, however, to think of these works as constituting a fully developed literary genre by the early fifth century. In fact, the oldest of the above-mentioned predecessors had been around for less than a century. Rather, Athanasius, Jerome and Severus had adapted the already-ancient biographical genre to a Christian cosmology and worldview. Accordingly, these works are marked by miracles and otherworldly apparitions: men and women are raised from the dead, healings and exorcisms occur, sinners are struck dead by a word or a touch, demons fight with saints. It is an environment in which God (and, indeed, the entire spirit world) is seen to be actively at work, shaping events on earth. These features are prominent in Paulinus' work, as well. But while Paulinus certainly looks to preceding works for inspiration, the category of hagiography is still a nebulous one and Paulinus possesses a great deal of freedom in the composition of the *V. Ambr.* and is not seriously restrained by rigid genre boundaries. Contemporary hagiographers, such as Possidius of Calama (*Vita Augustini*), for example, felt free to take a completely different path in the construction of the lives that they wrote. This section will focus on how Paulinus uses the evolving conventions of hagiography in order support his construct of the life of Ambrose.

Paulinus was charged by Augustine, of course, with composing a life of Ambrose. As with Ambrose's *De obitu Theodosii*, to take the *V. Ambr.* at face value is to misunderstand the aims that lay underneath the surface of the composition. In late antiquity, biographies of pagan holy men and women and Christian hagiographies were intended, at least in part, to advance philosophical or religious doctrines – whether the Neoplatonic ideals of the disciples of Plotinus or the Nicene orthodoxy of Athanasius' *Life of Antony*. Paulinus' *V. Ambr.*, as I argue above, is best understood within the context of the fight against Pelagian teaching taking place at the time of its writing during the 420s. Individual elements of these lives, such as miracles, must be understood in the context of the author's aims. Paulinus' emphasis on the truth-value of what he says must likewise be understood in this context.

From the outset, Paulinus uses the standard conventions of ancient biography to reinforce his aims. This is particularly the case within the introduction to the *V. Ambr.*, in which Paulinus utilizes a set of strategies relating to humility, veracity and source material to bolster his claims. To begin with, he makes claims of modest or even inadequate ability:

“Sed ego ut meritis tantorum virorum, qui muri ecclesiarum sunt et eloquentiae fontes, ita etiam sermone me imparem novi.”⁴⁷

[But I know that I am unequal to the talents of those great men, who are bulwarks of the churches and fountains of eloquence, just as I am to wordcraft.]

Paulinus protests that he is unskilled and not the best man for the job of writing a biography of Ambrose. This is a literary trope, not uncommon in ancient literature.⁴⁸ It is a sort of literary false modesty that helps to ingratiate the reader to the author. Despite its pervasive presence in ancient literature, Paulinus still puts it to good effect by not passing over it. He takes what would

⁴⁷ Paulin. *V. Ambr.* 1.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Tac. *Agr.* 3 and Jer. *V. Pauli*, 1. This trope, as well as many others, is explored in Tore Janson, *Latin Prose Prefaces: Studies in Literary Conventions*, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis: Studia Latina Stockholmiensia XIII (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1964), pp. 125ff.

normally be a formulaic part of an ancient biography and takes it a step further. He asserts that Ambrose himself will aid him, which is perhaps a foreshadowing of Paulinus' conception of Ambrose as a miracle worker.⁴⁹

Next (still within the context of the introduction), he adduces another set of claims relating to source material that further massages the reader to accept what is to come. He lists five sources upon whose testimony his work is based:

- a) “the things that I learned from the very trustworthy men who attended him before I did”
- b) “[the things that I learned from] his own sister, the venerable Marcellina”
- c) “[the things] that I saw myself when I attended him”
- d) “[the things] that I came to know from those who said that they saw him in different provinces after his death”
- e) “[the things] that were written to him when people were still unaware that he had died.”⁵⁰

This is all that Paulinus says at this point – the elaboration of each of these sources comes as the text unfolds. Paulinus does not really need to elaborate, though. The sheer length of this list, presented at the very outset of the work, would, I think, be overwhelming for a contemporary reader. There would be no questioning of his sources. Rather, Paulinus' intent is to show that, through these sources and through his own personal interaction with the bishop, he knows Ambrose as well as anyone can and is able to make definite claims about who Ambrose was and what he supported.

⁴⁹ *V. Ambr.* 1: “...adiutus orationibus tuis et meritis tanti viri”

⁵⁰ *V. Ambr.* 1: “...ea quae a probatissimis viris, qui illi ante me adstiterunt, et maxime ab sorore ipsius venerabili Marcellina didici, vel quae ipse vidi cum illi adstarem, vel quae ab his cognovi, qui illum scripta sunt, cum adhuc obisse nesciretur.”

A third concern of Paulinus' that is also addressed in the introduction is the truth-value of what he will write. What is at stake in Paulinus' claim of absolute veracity? He writes:

"...obsecro vos omnes, in quorum manibus liber iste versabitur, ut credatis vera esse quae scripsimus, nec putet me quisquam studio amoris aliquid quod fide careat posuisse."⁵¹

[...I beg all of you into whose hands this book will fall to believe that what we have written is true; let no one think that, out of an overweening love, I have put anything in it that is unreliable.]

Paulinus' claims to truthfulness can be understood in at least two ways. First, Paulinus' claim matches similar claims in works such as Sulpicius Severus' *Vita Martini*; it is a characteristic part of prefaces attached to this sort of work. Paulinus says that he relies heavily on events that he himself (*ipse*) saw. Furthermore, Paulinus and Sulpicius Severus both use the words *veritas* and *verus* with great frequency in describing their biographical endeavors.⁵² Second, Paulinus, in these truth claims, is *restating* the common ancient understanding of how the world works. For the ancients, there is little distinction between the natural and the supernatural. Spiritual forces are actively at work in the world. Holy men, whether pagan or Christian, are understood to be able to perform miraculous acts.⁵³ By insisting on the truthfulness of these events, Paulinus is re-emphasizing what everyone already knows – that a man who is in touch with God can perform wonders beyond the capacity of ordinary men.⁵⁴

⁵¹ *V. Ambr.* 2.

⁵² I am indebted to Sarah Traut for pointing this out to me, particularly with regard to Sulpicius Severus.

⁵³ For the 'thought-world' of late antiquity, see Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and his hagiographer: history and miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford: OUP, 1983), esp. ch. 15-18.

⁵⁴ Only once does the issue of truthfulness bear directly upon Ambrose himself. At *V. Ambr.* 15, Ambrose is accused of lying and bribing people to lie about the healings and other miracles performed by himself. Paulinus is especially concerned to quash the allegations once he has raised them, spending the rest of § 15 doing just that. The argument is this: the Arians must be lying because they sound exactly like the Jews did when they accused Jesus of lying.

B) Thematics

A close reading of the text of the *V. Ambr.* reveals Paulinus' deep and persistent concern with a number of themes: the Arian/Catholic conflict, the politics and theology of martyrdom, miracles (specifically the ones that Ambrose performed) and Ambrose's relationship with various 'men of power.' These themes are intimately connected to the way that Ambrose is portrayed in the *V. Ambr.*, i.e. as a man who is defined by two things: his performance of great miracles and his opposition to heresy. First, there are repeated references to the Nicene/Arian controversy.⁵⁵ Arianism is roundly condemned, at almost every mention, by Paulinus as "perfidy" (*Arrianae perfidiae*, §6) and as "insanity" (*vesanorum Arrianorum dementia*, §13). This portrayal is one of the most effective literary strategies that Paulinus employs; these descriptions very often set up instances where Paulinus desires to portray Ambrose as especially strong and decisive. For instance, *V. Ambr.* §6 recounts Ambrose's election as bishop. The scene opens with a reference to Auxentius, the previous bishop. He was not just any bishop, however; he was a "bishop of the Arian perfidy" (*episcopo Arrianae perfidiae*). This kind of labeling, at the very outset, creates a sense of distrust and suspicion. Into the situation steps Paulinus' Ambrose, a strong upright man who is unanimously acclaimed bishop as soon as he appears before the bickering crowd. But the strong upright man that Paulinus creates functions in a very formulaic, almost predictable way, which is made explicit later in Ambrose's confrontation with Innocent (§20). Narrating Innocent's attempts to stir up the people against Ambrose, Paulinus says, "But the more urgently and carefully he carried out his evil deeds, the

⁵⁵ References in the *V. Ambr.* occur at §§ 6, 8 ("the perfidy of the heretics"), 9, 11, 13-15, 16 ("so also would they be tormented who denied the martyrs and did not believe in the unity of the Trinity, which Ambrose taught"), 17, 18, and 34. Arianism is, of course, the unspoken issue behind the basilica controversy (13-20).

stronger grew the people's love for the Catholic faith and the Lord's bishop."⁵⁶ The same result obtains in other situations that Paulinus describes in these terms: each time an event is couched in terms of Arian "perfidy" or "insanity," Paulinus shows Ambrose at his most decisive.⁵⁷ Given the context in which Paulinus was writing, it would be difficult to imagine that he did not have the Pelagian controversy in the back of his mind as he recounted Ambrose's opposition to Arianism. It appears that he intended his audience to read these accounts of Ambrose opposing heresy in the 380s and, from them, to draw a connection to the contemporary (in the 420s) Catholic fight with the Pelagians. It is as if to say, "Ambrose opposed heresy then and he would oppose it now, were he alive." The problem, though, is that Paulinus does not explicitly make these connections for his reader. In other words, a reader of the *V. Ambr.* with a Pelagian slant would not necessarily have to interpret Paulinus' anti-Arian material as being directed at him. Interpreted in this light, Paulinus' emphasis on the Arian controversy does virtually nothing to advance his polemical aims in the *V. Ambr.*

A second prominent theme in the *V. Ambr.* is the omnipresence of martyrs and Ambrose's propensity for finding them. The most prominent martyr stories in the *V. Ambr.* are those of Protasius and Gervasius (§14), Vitalis and Agricola (§29), and Nazarius (§32). Late antique thought about martyrs saw them as intermediaries between God and man; furthermore, supernatural power was attributed to their physical remains.⁵⁸ Martyrs were invoked by those who wanted to be healed of an illness or who were afflicted by demon possession. Hilary of Poitiers saw the *martyria* as a vehicle for evangelism: the miracles performed there proclaimed

⁵⁶ *V. Ambr.* 20: "Sed quanto instantius et sollicitus opera maligna exercebat, tanto magis amor populi circa fidem catholicam et Domini sacerdotem convalescebat."

⁵⁷ Two episodes stand out: Ambrose's baptism and ordination (§9) and his defense of the Portian Basilica (§13).

⁵⁸ Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and his hagiographer*, 217. See also Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 113-120.

Christ.⁵⁹ The notion that holy men (bishops, ascetics) had a special relationship with martyrs and were able to call upon them virtually at will was also widespread in late antiquity. The continual reappearance of martyrs in the *V. Ambr.* makes two important points about Ambrose. First, the presence of the martyrs demonstrates that Ambrose is in touch with God. In each of the three instances mentioned above, Paulinus says that martyrs “revealed themselves” (*se sacerdoti revelaverunt*, §14) to Ambrose. This phraseology is significant: martyrs would not, presumably, reveal themselves to just anyone. This is another strategy of Paulinus’s that is designed to bolster his construct of Ambrose. Second, the martyrs are an important element in Ambrose’s own political calculus. In the *V. Ambr.*, martyrs most often “reveal themselves” in the midst of political uncertainty or crisis: all three of the martyr stories mentioned above take place within political contexts, namely the Arian/Catholic basilica controversy in 385-386 and the transitional period during 395, after the death of Theodosius, when Stilicho is stabilizing his hold on power. The martyrs, for Paulinus, demonstrate Ambrose’s command over imperial politics and portray him as a man who could count on divine support for his efforts to influence the governing authorities. The discovery of Protasius and Gervasius (and their re-interment in the Ambrosian Basilica) during the basilica controversy of 385-386 is a powerful example of another widespread belief about the power of martyrs: that the presence of the physical remains of a martyr in a specific place signified power (*praesentia*) and favor for that place and its people; the presence of the martyr ‘Catholicizes’ the location.⁶⁰ In this case, ‘favor’ should be understood as the political capital that accrues to Ambrose in his fight against Justina and Valentinian. For Paulinus, a very simple equation is all that is necessary to explain this power: “Thanks to the

⁵⁹ Stancliffe, pg. 217.

⁶⁰ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, pp. 88, 92-93.

martyrs' good works the faith of the Catholic Church increased to the same extent that the perfidy of the Arians decreased."⁶¹

A third theme that emerges repeatedly in the *V. Ambr.* is the performance of miracles by Ambrose. Not including the discovery of the martyrs, there are over 15 separate instances of miracles by or through Ambrose – both while alive and after death. Each of these miracle stories is designed, in general, to boost Paulinus' construct of Ambrose as a man in touch with God and filled with spiritual power. More specifically, Paulinus uses them to emphasize individual aspects of Ambrose's character and public image that invariably serve to bolster the overall image. There are miracles which demonstrate Ambrose's "grace" (§3, 6), that he was filled with the Spirit of the Lord (§4, 9, 10), his ability to heal (§10, 52), his dominance over the spirit world (§21, 43, 48-51) and his power over life and death (§11, 28, 54) – those who contradict him or criticize him are subject to being struck dead. All of these occurrences serve to sharpen the image of Ambrose that Paulinus creates. They also serve to strengthen Ambrose's authority vis-à-vis the Scriptures. In one account of a healing (§10), Paulinus interprets Ambrose's actions as a fulfillment of Jesus' statement that "those who believe in my name will do even greater things than these [i.e. the things that Jesus himself did]" (John 14.12). This is only one of a number of occasions where Ambrose is directly compared to biblical characters and appears to inhabit a reified Biblical world in which he acts out, in his own time, stories from the Biblical canon (cf. *V. Ambr.* 8, 25). All of this lends credence to Ambrose's claims to be a spiritual leader and, more importantly, to Paulinus' construct of him.

A fourth theme is Ambrose's relationships with "men (and women) of power:" including Gratian, Theodosius, Valentinian II, Justina, Maximus, Arbogast, Eugenius, Fritigil and Stilicho.

⁶¹ *V. Ambr.* 14: "Sed his beneficiis martyrum in quantum crescebat fides ecclesiae catholicae, in tantum Arrianorum perfidia minuebatur."

Throughout his career, Ambrose sought out opportunities to draw close to those in power (whether legitimate or illegitimate) in the West; the *Vita Ambrosii* is filled with such encounters. But what purpose do these encounters serve in Paulinus' narrative? And what might they say about the setting of Paulinus' work in the context of the early 420s? On one level, they make a statement about Ambrose's power and influence. He has to be important: he has the ear of the emperor and influential political figures (e.g. Symmachus). Barbarian queens sought him out for catechetical instruction.⁶² He dined frequently with consuls and prefects.⁶³ But amid all of this, Ambrose did have standards which he applied to these interactions – standards with which he attempted to balance his position as a bishop with the exigencies of political maneuvering.⁶⁴ Possidius notes: “[Augustine] said that in the life of one of God's servants the rule should be observed which he had learned from St Ambrose of holy memory's teaching, namely, never to seek a wife for another man, nor to encourage anyone who wished to go to war, nor to attend a feast in one's own civic community.”⁶⁵ These rules were designed to allow a moderate ascetic who was also the bishop of the capital of the western empire to function adequately in society.⁶⁶ Despite careful attention to propriety, the *V. Ambr.* and other sources reveal that there were times when Ambrose's position at court was very shaky, e.g. during Valentinian II's brief reign so dominated by the fight over Arianism with the emperor's mother, Justina. Furthermore, there were conversations and arrangements made with the Western usurpers Maximus and Eugenius, which might be, and apparently were, seen as questionable. Paulinus perhaps recognizes this,

⁶² *V. Ambr.* 36. It is also worth noting here that Ambrose takes catechesis as an opportunity to give foreign policy instruction – inserting himself into imperial affairs with an ease which had resulted in imperial rebuke on earlier occasions (cf. Ambrose, *Ep.* 51, written in the aftermath of the massacre at Thessalonika in 389).

⁶³ Sulpicius Severus, *Dial.* 1.25. Ambrose himself discusses the practice at *Exp. evang. sec. Lucam* 5.18. For a negative view of dining with the rich and powerful, see Jer. *Ep.* 52.11.

⁶⁴ As McLynn notes (pg. 257): “Ambrose participated fully in the exchanges [e.g., banquets, CRC] necessary to maintain his social position without compromising his sacerdotal obligations.”

⁶⁵ Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 27.4.

⁶⁶ McLynn, pp. 256-257.

but this certainly is not reflected in his portrayal of those less-than-favorable social contacts. Whatever the risks involved in including stories about usurpers or dangerous run-ins with an imperial court infected with heresy, Paulinus has an empty canvas on which he can depict these incidents in a suitable way, i.e. in a way that emphasizes the relevant virtues of Ambrose in his relationship with imperial officials and de-emphasizes the taint of heresy or usurpation. For examples, consider Ambrose's dealings with the usurper Maximus, who had been responsible for slaying the Emperor Gratian, and with the general Arbogast. In *V. Ambr.* 19, on the second of two missions to Maximus' court at Trier in 386, the bishop is commissioned to claim the unburied body of Gratian.⁶⁷ Upon Maximus' (implied) refusal to hand over the body, Ambrose cut him off from the communion of the Church. For a usurper who invested so much of his hoped-for legitimacy in his claim to Nicene orthodoxy, this was, to be sure, a damaging blow. For Paulinus, the lesson is clear (and is stated explicitly even before the narrative itself commences): Ambrose's actions are a sign of his firmness (*quam constanter egerit*). In his contact with powerful figures, Ambrose maintains his position and places himself on an equal footing with his interlocutor.

Secondly, at *V. Ambr.* 30, Paulinus describes a banquet at which Arbogast was present. In this setting, Arbogast is questioned as to his relationship with Ambrose: "he replied that he knew the man and was his friend, and that he was in the habit of dining frequently with him."⁶⁸ Arbogast, of course, had been somehow involved (to what degree is not clear) in the murder/suicide (again, not clear) of Valentinian II and had placed his own candidate, Eugenius, a senator with known leanings toward pagan revivalism, on the Western throne. What is most interesting about this passage of the *V. Ambr.* is the set of strategies that Paulinus employs to

⁶⁷ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, pg. 164n. 25.

⁶⁸ *V. Ambr.* 30: "respondisset nosse se virum et diligere ab eo atque frequenter cum illo convivari solitum..."

cleanse the connection between Arbogast and Ambrose while maintaining the obvious value of Ambrose's influence within the centers of power in the West. First, it is useful to note the placement of the episode. Immediately preceding it is the story of the martyrs Vitalis and Agricola, who are said to have revealed themselves to the bishop (*se sancti martyres...revelassent*). Thus, even before the story is told, Ambrose is established as a strong, spiritual presence. Within the episode itself, Paulinus filters the story through a "certain very religious young man" (*iuvene quodam Arbogastis admodum religioso*) who was serving as Arbogast's cupbearer. In addition to this, as the kings of his own people address Arbogast at the banquet, they compare Ambrose directly to God, who had caused, at the request of Joshua, the sun to stand still (Joshua 10.12-13). Paulinus delays any negative comments about Arbogast until the following section (31), where he relates his promise to Ambrose that, if victorious, he would turn the basilica of the church of Milan into a stable for his horses.⁶⁹ Thus, Paulinus creates an unproblematic, clean space in which he can emphasize Ambrose's virtues and his connections to the powerful and not have to address directly the implications of a positive compliment paid to Ambrose by Arbogast (and by the implication that he frequently dined with Arbogast!). Paulinus is able to have it both ways: he can use Arbogast's name recognition and power in the West and still denigrate him later.

These episodes, however, should also be considered in the light of how they would be interpreted among Paulinus' first readers in the early 420s. How effective would Paulinus' appeals to 'men of power' have been in the minds of his contemporary readers, particularly with regard to the raging debate between Augustine and Julian? Jerome, obviously, views

⁶⁹ "cum victores reversi fuissent" refers to the impending battle between the forces of Eugenius and Arbogast and those of Theodosius at the river Frigidus in September 395.

hobnobbing with the rich and famous negatively.⁷⁰ Paulinus, however, it seems reasonable to suppose, would have followed the example of his bishop and therefore not have faulted him for this behavior. For Paulinus, the emphasis on Ambrose's connections with 'men of power' is not merely a question of the people with whom Ambrose was seen. The value of Ambrose's connections can be found in the Church's increasing reliance during this period on the use of imperial authority to fight those that they deemed to be heretics.⁷¹ The debate with Pelagius and Julian was, of course, fought out in theological treatises and sermons. But the Catholic Church also sought out imperial aid in the contest. The doctrines of Pelagius were condemned at the behest of the imperial authorities in Rome when appealed to by Pope Zosimus – and Pelagius himself was banished from Rome (rescript dated 30 April 418). Julian was exiled to the East and never returned to his beloved Italy. We already know that Ambrose had the ear of God through the martyrs and through his spiritual worth, but Paulinus is also concerned to show that he had the ear of the imperial authorities and those in power throughout the West. The implication for Paulinus is that he would have opposed Pelagianism had he been alive and he would have and could have appealed to the authorities to condemn it.

All four of the themes that I have mentioned – the Arian/Catholic conflict, martyrdom, miracles, and 'men of power' – shape the overarching narrative of the *V. Ambr.* in such a way that Ambrose is presented as a man who is linked by strong ties of favor to God Himself and is unalterably opposed to heresy of any form. This is done intentionally: Paulinus wants to create an Ambrose who is strong and unquestionably holy, a man whose virtues should shame heretics who are fighting the Church.

⁷⁰ See, again, Jer. *Ep.* 52.11.

⁷¹ Among other places see Peter Brown, "St Augustine's Attitude to Religious Conversion," in *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), pp. 260ff.

Ambrose and Stilicho in (and out of) the *Vita Ambrosii*

The third and final section of this chapter will analyze four stories in the *V. Ambr.* where Ambrose and Stilicho come into contact, through the historical and literary filters already discussed: the discovery of the martyr Nazarius, the conflict over Cresconius, Stilicho's unnamed slave, and Stilicho's anxiety at the death of Ambrose. In doing so, I will be most interested in the way that Paulinus constructs Ambrose and Stilicho in each story and his goals and intentions in so doing.

A) Nazarius the martyr

At §§32-33, Paulinus gives an account of the discovery and interment of the body of the martyr Nazarius in July 395.⁷² As with other martyr discoveries, supernatural events surround discovery of the corpse and the establishment of a martyrium. When the body of Nazarius was exhumed, his (detached) head was in perfect condition – complete with clean and coiffed hair and beard. Paulinus interprets this as the fulfillment of prophecy, viz. Jesus' statement in Luke 21.18 that not a hair on the head of his followers would perish (*quod capillus de capite eorum non peribit*). In addition, at the placement of the body in the Basilica of the Apostles, Ambrose has to confront a demon who has possession of the body of a man who has come to the martyrium, presumably, to be exorcised. In this encounter with supernatural forces, Paulinus depicts Ambrose as one who, by word alone, can rebuke a demon into submission.

There are political realities surrounding this event, however, that Paulinus does not discuss. As noted, the body of Nazarius was placed in the Basilica of the Apostles. The inscription on the martyrium itself survives, revealing that Serena, Stilicho's wife, provided the Libyan marble for the martyrium:

⁷² See McLynn, 363n. 9.

exultat hunc tumuli esse locum,
quem pius Ambrosius signavit imagine Christi,
marmoribus Libycis fida Serena polit,
coniugis ut reditu Stiliconis laeta fruatur
germanisque suis, pignoribus propriis.⁷³

[Nazarius exults that this is the location of the sepulcher, which holy Ambrose marked with the image of Christ, and which trusty Serena embellished with Libyan marble, so that she, happy at the return of her husband Stilicho, might take pleasure in it along with her brothers and sisters and her own children.]

The interment and the surrounding events take place in late 396 when Stilicho is in the East on campaign against Alaric. For Serena, there is the concern that her husband will not make it back from a perhaps ill-considered escapade into the Balkans. Aside from this, there are other concerns at work. As the events around Theodosius' death attest, Stilicho's accession to power in the West was suspicious to say the least. Serena, who was politically savvy in her own right, recognized the needs of the moment. First, there is the need to shore up her husband's power while he is away. This is done by reinforcing the appearance of normality in the wake of the usurpation of Eugenius and Arbogast and the battle at Frigidus. Stilicho, to this end, had made few administrative changes when he assumed power.⁷⁴ Now Serena pursues continuity with Theodosius' administration in another important way: his support for Catholic orthodoxy. This plays into the second important need for Stilicho's administration in its first year: to ingratiate the new administration with the leading bishop in the West. Even if we allow that there is a good deal of exaggeration in Ambrose's estimation of his own influence, it still makes good political sense for a shaky new administration to seek his favor.⁷⁵ Stilicho had already recognized this in his claim of Ambrose's endorsement. But, as Neil McLynn points out, Serena's donation of

⁷³ Excerpted from Ernest Diehl, ed. *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres*, Vol. 1 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1961), no. 1801 [pg. 352]. Translation is my own.

⁷⁴ For the continuity in personnel between Theodosius and Stilicho's administrations, see John Matthews, *Western Aristocracies*, pp. 258ff.

⁷⁵ See McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, pg. 364.

Libyan marble serves to bring church and court together in a concrete way.⁷⁶ This integration of church and court will be seen more clearly in the other stories that we discuss.

But, despite all of this, Paulinus makes no mention of the involvement of Stilicho's family. Why? Wouldn't this be another instance that he could construct favorably for Ambrose's influence? Is mentioning the name of Stilicho in a potentially positive light simply too risky? I think that this might well be an example of the anti-barbarian feeling that colors the opinions of other writers regarding Stilicho. Paulinus does not seem to have any problem citing, for instance, Arbogast's relationship with Ambrose, because it suits his overall purpose of portraying Ambrose as a man of wide influence. This situation, however, might not obtain in the case of Stilicho. The fact that Stilicho was, by 422, a politically disgraced "barbarian" might well have made it impossible for Paulinus to accept that he could be orthodox or politically worthy at all. Whatever Ambrose thought of Stilicho (something we cannot truly know through the filter of Paulinus' construct of Ambrose in the *V. Ambr.*), by Paulinus' time, it would have been politically unacceptable to cast Stilicho and his family in so favorable a light. If Paulinus saw Stilicho entirely negatively, the most natural interpretation of this omission is that Serena's involvement with the martyrdom would have lent itself to an interpretation that was too positive for polemical use.

B) Cresconius

Paulinus, at *V. Ambr.* 34, narrates the story of Cresconius, one of Stilicho's slaves. During the games held on the occasion of Honorius' accession to the consulship in January 396, soldiers sent by Stilicho "with the encouragement of the prefect Eusebius" (*hortatu Eusebii praefecti*) invaded Ambrose's cathedral for the purpose of seizing "a certain Cresconius," but

⁷⁶ Ibid.

were devoured by leopards in retribution.⁷⁷ Several issues are at stake in this story for Paulinus and for his readers: anti-barbarian rhetoric is entwined with religion; questions are raised about the attitude of Paulinus and his contemporaries to Stilicho, about Ambrose's relationship to power and about the nature of asylum in late antiquity. For the sake of clarity, I will take these issues individually. For Paulinus, Stilicho and the soldiers with "Arian" commanders are of a piece. The prevailing anti-barbarian rhetoric of the fifth century made no distinction between freshly recruited Germanic tribesmen from the woods beyond the Danube and fully Romanized high-ranking military officials like Stilicho who happened to have a parent who was of Germanic origin.⁷⁸ 'Barbarian' or 'German' by this time carried with it many negative overtones: 'Germans' were rude, uncivilized, and ever capable of treason.⁷⁹ The large numbers of German troops in the late Roman army (particularly in the West) were seen as something of a Trojan Horse. Thus, Stilicho was as much a savage as were the infantrymen who were sent in to arrest Cresconius. Furthermore, Paulinus refers to the commanders as 'Arian.' It is quite true that many of the Germanic tribes in Europe (by the early fifth century on either side of the Danube) had been converted to Christianity through the work of missionaries of the Arian persuasion. For example, the bishop Wulfila had evangelized among the Goths in the late fourth century. By the fifth century, however, the use of the term 'Arian' was as imprecise and malleable as 'barbarian.' The two were easily conflated: in a situation such as the one in *V. Ambr.* 34, 'Arian' was as much an ethnic slur as a religious one. Furthermore, Stilicho's barbarian parentage would have made him all the more susceptible to charges of unorthodox belief – he did, after, all associate with barbarian soldiers and chieftains who were Arians. The upshot of all of this is that Stilicho is

⁷⁷ According to PLRE i.306-307, this took place in January. Eusebius was PPO Italiae. For Eusebius' legislation on either side of the event, see CTh 1.15.4a pp. Romae (19 December 395) and CTh 13.11.8a (29 March 396).

⁷⁸ See above, pp. 58-61.

⁷⁹ Note what Orosius says about the Vandals, n. 24 above.

just as savage and dangerous to the Roman body politic and ecclesiastic as the hostile tribesmen across the Danube.

With the players introduced, Paulinus' narrative then moves from the arena to the church. The fugitive, Cresconius, had sought refuge at the altar of Ambrose's church and was surrounded by a cordon of clerics when the soldiers entered the basilica.⁸⁰ The soldiers entered the cathedral and carried off Cresconius. This is the dramatic climax of the story as Paulinus tells it: the soldiers, exultant, carried Cresconius back to the arena, and the Church was cast down into "a state of no little lamentation, for the bishop lay prostrate before the Lord's altar and wept over the deed for a long time."⁸¹ Paulinus, however, hardly wants his readers to contemplate Ambrose in a position of weakness – indeed helplessness – except, possibly, for the dramatic effect such a position might have.⁸² In the next sentence order is restored – the malefactors receive their due: having brought Cresconius back to the arena, the soldiers were attacked and mangled by the leopards brought in for the day's entertainment. For Paulinus, the soldiers were punished because they violated the practice of asylum – a tradition dating back at least to the classical period in Greece – and the sanctity of the person who sought asylum in a temple or, in late antiquity, a church.⁸³ Paulinus continues the story by relating that Stilicho, deeply affected by this outcome, "for many days...made reparation" (*ita ut per multos dies satisfaceret sacerdoti*) to Ambrose and released Cresconius unharmed. This frustratingly brief statement

⁸⁰ Some clue to the motivation of Cresconius in fleeing to a basilica may be found in *CTh* 9.45.3-5 (ca. 432) and *Sirm.* 13 (419), which governed the fate of slaves who sought asylum in a Catholic church. Moreover, there was also an idea current, which held that the slaves of heretics were automatically freed should they seek refuge in a Catholic church. This action seems to have "catholicized" the slave.

⁸¹ "...ecclesiae luctum non modicum relinquentes; nam sacerdos prostrates ante altare Domini factum diu flevit" (Paulin. *V.Ambr.* 34).

⁸² As will be seen later, in the episode of the slave of Stilicho who was selling forged commissions, the degree of antagonism that Paulinus creates between Ambrose and Stilicho in this story seems to be something of an exaggeration.

⁸³ For classical Greece, see the story of Pausanias of Sparta at Thuc. 1.134. For sanctuary in Christian churches, see Zosimus 5.29.9 (Lampadius), 5.34.3 (Stilicho), 5.35.4 (Eucherius), 5.45.4 (Heliocrates). References from Matthews,

leads one to wonder what exactly might be behind it. Paulinus' portrayal of this exchange between Ambrose and Stilicho reads very much like the received version of events when Ambrose and Theodosius met at the door of the basilica following Ambrose's excommunication of Theodosius.⁸⁴ The formula of each account is almost identical. A leader does something that is in direct opposition to Ambrose's wishes. For reasons of faith (or publicity or politics – but faith is usually the reason given), the leader is compelled to make supplication before Ambrose. In each episode, the outcome is that Ambrose is cast in a position of power and authority with respect to the political leader. Ambrose makes the same fearless stand for truth in the presence of imperial authority that Antony made in Athanasius' *Life*. As we have seen, this mode of portrayal obscures the political realities of interactions at the imperial court. There are always maneuvers taking place behind the scenes to which reader is simply not privy and Ambrose never quite occupies the position of power that Paulinus and others would have the reader to believe that he does. The question remains: why would Stilicho so suddenly do penance? Paulinus' assertion that Stilicho was greatly affected by the attack of the leopards is entirely unverifiable. He has no direct insight into Stilicho's mind. The way in which Paulinus depicts the situation in truth only serves to increase Ambrose's stature, not to give us hard facts about the episode. None of this is to say that Paulinus' assertion is impossible. But what sort of relationship would Stilicho and Ambrose have had that would have paved the way for such an action? Paulinus gives no insight to this question. Furthermore, the political implications of the move cannot be ignored: it would have to be politically advantageous for Stilicho to do penance. Stilicho's power was still very new in January 396 when the incident took place. He could not

"Olympiodorus of Thebes," 95n. 171. Note also that, when Ambrose himself seeks asylum with Leontius to prevent being appointed a bishop, he is handed over to the authorities (*V.Ambr.* 9).

⁸⁴ Cf. the versions of that story in Sulpicius Severus, Theodoret (*HE* 5.17) and Sozomen (*HE* 7.25). See also Paulin. *V.Ambr.* 24 and Ambr. *Ep.* 51.

afford to antagonize a powerful bishop, particularly one whose support he needed in the aftermath of the death of Theodosius – even if it was his own slave at issue. Perhaps he realized he had gone too far in his actions by alienating Ambrose. If that is the case, the easiest way to remedy the situation would have been to walk down the path already trod by Theodosius himself. Theodosius won a great deal of praise for his penitent actions; Stilicho might have believed that he could do the same with an equally advantageous outcome.⁸⁵

Finally, the Cresconius incident makes an important statement about the nature of asylum in late antiquity. By 422, Stilicho had been executed and was in disgrace. As has already been seen, he was an easy target against which to demonstrate the virtues of Ambrose. But Paulinus uses the stories of Stilicho and Ambrose to make other statements as well. Given that, it is useful to consider the Cresconius incident in light of Stilicho's own assassination, which this story seems to recall. In August 408, Stilicho sought refuge from impending arrest in a church in Ravenna. A squadron of troops sent by Honorius' new favorite, Olympius, promised Stilicho that if he surrendered he would not be harmed. They told him that they had no orders to kill him. Placated by their pledge, Stilicho surrendered, only to be killed on the spot by a second band of soldiers who *were* given orders to kill him. Writing several years after that event, might Paulinus be saying that Stilicho got just what he deserved, that, since he had violated the law of asylum, he could not expect for it to be honored in his case? The right of asylum, as evidenced by the abundance of legislation in the *Codex Theodosianus*, was extremely important for the Church as

⁸⁵ McLynn, 364, asserts that Stilicho's penance was "merely a gesture," noting that Stilicho got exactly what he wanted out of the episode, i.e. the arrest and exile of Cresconius. It is undeniably true that Paulinus' version of events probably gives too much credit to Ambrose and his influence. To my mind, however, McLynn downplays how tenuous Stilicho's position still was and how much he needed the backing of Ambrose. In 396, Stilicho was again campaigning in the East in an attempt to enforce his claims over Arcadius. The following year (397) witnessed the revolt of Gildo. The point is this: Stilicho had a plateful of problems confronting him and he could not have easily spurned the support of Ambrose. McLynn himself seems to suggest as much: "It was a thus a time of rare stability. During the first years of Stilicho's administration, the alliance between the senatorial aristocrats of Rome, the *virī militares* of the court, and the church of Milan worked better perhaps than ever before (366)."

well as for society as a whole. Those who tampered with it should and did pay for it. In that light, it was very easy for Paulinus to take a shot at Stilicho for running roughshod over the right of asylum when he was alive.

C) The unnamed slave of Stilicho

At *V. Ambr.* 43, Paulinus relates how one of Stilicho's slaves had been forging and selling letters of recommendation for the tribuneship. The slave, according to Paulinus, had at one time been afflicted with an unclean spirit that, presumably, had been removed. The slave stayed on amid the crowd in the Ambrosian Basilica and began selling forged letters of appointment to the imperial service.⁸⁶ When he was caught, Stilicho was reluctant to punish him and brought him to Ambrose. Paulinus reports that when the bishop questioned the slave and found that the accusations against him were true, he handed him over to Satan (cf. 1 Corinthians 5.5) and an unclean spirit seized him and began to rip him apart.

Two things stand out in this account: first, Stilicho is portrayed as working with Ambrose rather than against him. This story certainly suggests that Stilicho came to rely on Ambrose in a number of different capacities both personal and political. McLynn points out that this is reflective of the makeup of Honorius' court in the early years of his reign. For example, those who held the prefecture (on either side of Eusebius [*V. Ambr.* 34]) in these years, Dexter and Manlius Theodorus, were very close to Ambrose.⁸⁷ Paternus, Honorius' *comes sacrarum largitionum*, also sought out advice from Ambrose.⁸⁸ This reality, as well as the fact that Stilicho would hand over his slave – a violator of the laws of the state – to Ambrose for punishment, reflects a high degree of cooperation between the bishop and the imperial court. This story provides an important insight into Ambrose's position at court during the years 395 to 397: the

⁸⁶ McLynn, 365.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

influence that Ambrose wanted and did not achieve during the years of Theodosius, was finally his during the first years of the reign of Honorius. For Paulinus, no matter what Stilicho's posthumous reputation, it certainly does no harm to Ambrose to have a figure at court so close to him.

Secondly, the primary focus of the story, as told by Paulinus is on the miraculous element of it, i.e. the exorcising of the unclean spirit and the coming of another unclean spirit to destroy the dishonest slave. The focus of Paulinus' attention has shifted between this story and the Cresconius pericope. While the story of Cresconius sought to bolster the influence of Ambrose and the power he held over important men, the story of the unnamed slave has a completely different focus. Given the placement of this story in the narrative between two other miracle stories, Paulinus seems to utilize it as a platform from which he can again emphasize Ambrose's powers over supernatural forces and his connection with God.⁸⁹ The fact that this particular display of power happens to involve Stilicho seems to be peripheral to Paulinus' goals.

D) Ambrose's death

As the reader comes to the final mention of Stilicho in the *V. Ambr.*, he will notice a progression in the relationship between Stilicho and Ambrose (as portrayed by Paulinus in the *V. Ambr.*) that can only be fully appreciated by looking at the four main pericopes side by side. These stories of Stilicho and Ambrose, when observed together, form a sort of 'conversion' narrative. The reader is led from seeing Serena act on behalf of Stilicho to the first clash between him and Ambrose to cooperation between the two and to the final moments of Ambrose's life where Stilicho's devotion and loyalty are complete and he cannot bear the

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ *V. Ambr.* 42 tells how a small flame appeared over Ambrose's head. Paulinus interpreted this, with help, as the descent of the Holy Spirit onto Ambrose. *V. Ambr.* 44 tells the story of how Ambrose healed the foot pain of a certain Nicentius.

prospect of Ambrose's death (Paulin. *V. Ambr.* 45). Stilicho, of course, only plays a small part in entirety of the *V. Ambr.*, but when each of the four pericopes are set side by side the effect is striking. As has already been seen, the neatness and tidiness of such a progression are cause for suspicion. For instance, Paulinus seems to have exaggerated the conflict between Ambrose and Stilicho during the Cresconius incident in order to emphasize Ambrose's power and influence.

At any rate, *V. Ambr.* 45 contains the shortest of these four pericopes, which involves an indirect encounter between the two men. The reader is told that Ambrose is on his deathbed. The scene then abruptly switches to the private councils of Stilicho. According to Paulinus, Stilicho "is reported to have said" that the death of Ambrose would be the death of Italy. Therefore, Stilicho convened a council of "distinguished men of that city [Milan]," at which he pleaded with and cajoled them to try to convince Ambrose to put off dying a while longer. The bishop, however, demurred. As with so many other scenarios that Paulinus includes in the *V. Ambr.*, how did Paulinus, twenty five years on, know about Stilicho's mindset and most private councils? It is plausible that Stilicho, having been in power only two years, might have seen Ambrose as a critical ally. Nevertheless, this scene seems designed to say more about Ambrose and his influence than about Stilicho and his political fortunes. No matter how plausible or implausible the scenario that Paulinus has created, it is not his purpose truly to get inside Stilicho's head or to demonstrate the inner workings of the imperial court. Stilicho and the council of concerned citizens are a canvas upon which Paulinus can vividly show how important Ambrose is and what an enormous impact his impending death will have on Italy and on the imperial court.

So, both the story of the unnamed slave and the story of Ambrose's impending death provide Paulinus opportunities to make definitive statements about the bishop's power and

influence. Despite the fact that, ostensibly, we are taken into Stilicho's innermost councils and thoughts, these two vignettes give us only the vaguest hints as to what the relationship between Ambrose and Stilicho was actually like.

Conclusions

In order to properly understand the accounts of contacts between Stilicho and Ambrose in the *V. Ambr.*, it is necessary to understand the historical circumstances and literary concerns of Paulinus' work – the influences that are at work on his portrayal of Ambrose. As has been seen, Paulinus' approach to Ambrose and to Stilicho is affected by the posthumous exaltation of one and denigration of the other. It is necessary to remember that Stilicho, at the time of the publication of the *V. Ambr.* in 422, was disgraced. Paulinus' treatment of him reflects this. By 422, Ambrose had been highly exalted as one who worked miracles, stood up to imperial authority and appeared to people after his death. Paulinus' treatment of him cannot be understood apart from this background. From a literary standpoint, Paulinus adapts the developing conventions of hagiography to his ultimate purpose. Through reports of miracles of healing, the discovery of martyrs and a strong stand against resurgent Arianism, Paulinus is creating an Ambrose whom he believes will be an effective tool in the fight against Pelagianism. From a reader-response perspective, it is sometimes difficult to see how Paulinus' various strategies would have convinced his readers of much of anything. Nevertheless, Paulinus' ultimate goal is clear, and everything that he does in the *V. Ambr.* is geared toward that goal, effective or not.

Having said that, this chapter is concerned with Paulinus' portrayal of the relationship between Ambrose and Stilicho. In four episodes, he brings the two men together. In terms of the goals of Paulinus' overall narrative, each of these episodes has a different purpose. He draws

upon a number of strategies – anti-barbarian rhetoric, performance of miracles, etc. – to achieve those goals. Unfortunately for the reader, those goals do not include a straightforward account of the contacts between Stilicho and Ambrose. To approach the relationship between these two men, it is necessary to wade through Paulinus’ varied concerns and his carefully crafted image of Ambrose. It can fairly be said that Paulinus’ portrayal of Ambrose governs how he will portray anyone else, Stilicho included. Stilicho (and/or his family) is used when convenient and ignored when not. Paulinus is more than ready to draw upon the political prejudices of his day to create the Stilicho that he needs (as well as the kind of relationship with Stilicho that he needs for Ambrose to have). Given this, there is very little that the reader can expect to learn about what must have been – judging from the few hints that are given – a very close and mutually beneficial relationship.

One can read between the lines, however, using what is said. By doing this, a basic sketch does emerge: during the final two years of Ambrose’s life, he had greater access to the imperial court than at any other time during his episcopal career. This is due in part to the fact that Stilicho’s claims to power on behalf of Honorius remained shaky during that time. He sought out every possible way to shore up his power; to do this, he desperately needed the support of one of the West’s most influential bishops. Both he and his family were careful to ingratiate themselves with the bishop (cf. the martyrdom for Nazarius). Further, Stilicho realized that he did not have the luxury of being inconsiderate of Ambrose’s views in the way that a Theodosius could have. When, by sending troops into Ambrose’s church, he antagonized the bishop, he was quick to repair the damage that he had caused. Furthermore, Stilicho actively sought out Ambrose’s help in governmental matters, turning over a slave to the bishop for punishment. Stilicho’s relationship to Ambrose (as well as the relationship to Ambrose of other

figures at the imperial court) was close. When Ambrose lay on his deathbed, it is natural to suppose that Stilicho would have bemoaned the passing of one of his greatest sources of support. With the death of Ambrose at Easter 397, the coming months and years and the events that they held – the revolt of Gildo, trouble with Alaric, and continuing animosity between Ravenna and Constantinople – must have looked that much more daunting to Stilicho.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

At the outset of this endeavor, I made the claim that one could learn something of Stilicho and Ambrose (and their relationship) through a close examination of the texts that speak of direct contacts between the two of them. A close reading of the *De obitu Theodosii* and the *Vita Sancti Ambrosii*, however, has humbled that claim somewhat. While it is certainly possible to cut through layers of rhetoric and self-presentation to arrive at a plausible reconstruction of events, in many ways these works are inseparable from the rhetoric that enshrouds them. In addition to this, no single one of these texts has, as its primary goal, an understanding – an objective picture – of the political relationship between these men. When Ambrose rises to deliver a eulogy for Theodosius, the late emperor's generals are not at the forefront of his mind. As has been seen, Ambrose's reference to Stilicho – in which Stilicho himself seems to have placed so much stock – is best understood in the context of a larger (and, for Ambrose, more urgent) exhortation to the army to support the two young sons of Theodosius. Likewise, Paulinus has particular interests in mind in his presentation of Ambrose, interests that affect the way that he depicts Ambrose's interactions with Stilicho and all of the other people with whom Ambrose relates. Above all, Paulinus is concerned to show Ambrose as a man who is connected to God and who is fearless before the imperial authorities. While it is easy to see how at the outset Ambrose could have held a position of power vis-à-vis the general, Paulinus is not completely successful in papering over occasions when Ambrose is at the mercy of imperial officials, including Stilicho.

So, coming to the end of the source material, what *can* be known and what does the evidence suggest about the relationship between Stilicho and Ambrose? A tentative picture

emerges. As stated above, it is clear that Ambrose as a representative (even if only self-appointed) of the Theodosian establishment in the early months of 395 is in a more powerful position than is Stilicho. At this point, Stilicho's claims to office are still shaky and he sees an appeal to the authority of Ambrose as a good way to bolster those claims. As time passes, Stilicho is able to establish his guardianship over Honorius, if not over Arcadius as well. Despite some missteps in the East in the years from 395-397, he successfully suppresses the revolt of Gildo and patches up relations with Constantinople, establishing his position in the West for the next decade. During this time, one sees, following Paulinus' account, a concomitant evolution in Stilicho's relationship with Ambrose. In July 395, with Ambrose's discovery of the remains of the martyr Nazarius, Serena, Stilicho's wife, donates the Libyan marble for a monument for Nazarius. The political subtexts are extremely important: martyr 'discoveries' by Ambrose always occur at politically significant times. The discoveries help to cement Ambrose's authority as a holy man. Stilicho is campaigning in the East in an attempt to establish his claim of guardianship over Arcadius. Reading the inscription on the monument, one gathers that his wife and family are concerned for his safety. But his political fortunes must also be of concern for them. So, in order to strengthen the relationship of the imperial court (particularly the absent general) with Ambrose, Serena donates the materials for the martyrium which is to stand in Ambrose's own Basilica of the Apostles.

Some time passes before Paulinus mentions the first instance of direct contact between the two men. One of Stilicho's slaves, named Cresconius, escapes and seeks refuge in Ambrose's basilica. Stilicho and the prefect Eusebius send in soldiers to extract the slave from the building, ignoring the constraints of asylum. As Paulinus tells the story, Ambrose is left prostrate and weeping on the floor of the basilica as the squadron of soldiers leaves with

Cresconius in custody. Later, the soldiers are mangled by leopards. This outcome, according to Paulinus, moves Stilicho to penance. Realizing that he has overstepped his limits, Stilicho made reparation by releasing Cresconius and sending him into exile. It seems clear from this episode that, despite the melodramatic way in which Paulinus depicts the players, Stilicho is seeking a cordial relationship with Ambrose and is willing to do what it takes to ensure that the relationship is a stable and beneficial one.

After this incident, there is a distinct increase in the closeness of Ambrose and Stilicho's relationship. Two further incidents are mentioned by Paulinus: first, the case of the slave of Stilicho who was selling imperial commissions in the graveyard of Ambrose's basilica and, second, the events surrounding Ambrose's death. In the first instance, Stilicho and Ambrose are explicitly depicted as working together in the matter; in the second, Stilicho is distraught at the prospect of Ambrose's impending death. Taking into account the ways in which Paulinus seeks to inflate Ambrose's reputation and power in every instance, it is still clear that Stilicho saw Ambrose as an indispensable political ally – one who could help him in a variety of situations and one whose death left him bereft of support on which he had come to rely. So, despite Stilicho's missteps, from the time he laid claim to power, he saw Ambrose as an ally who could provide him with the legitimacy that he desperately needed initially and as a pillar of support for the government that he established in the West during the first years of his regency.

The limitations on these conclusions should be apparent: as stated before, the evidence is extremely limited and the kind of evidence that one might like to possess (e.g. letters written from Ambrose to Stilicho or contemporary accounts of events in Milan in those years) simply does not exist. Even granting this lack of evidence, however, the lack of scholarly interest in this particular aspect of the careers of Ambrose and Stilicho remains puzzling. Having said this, it

seems to me that knowledge of the relationship between these two men leads naturally to other questions. During the fifth century, a string of men, referred to as patricians (e.g. Ricimer and Odovacer), came to power in the West: Stilicho stands at the head of this succession of generals. How did these men relate to established ecclesiastical structures and to bishops who, perhaps, overstated their own prerogatives? Could it be said that the death of Theodosius represents the opening of a new era in the history of the Empire in the West in more than one way? He was the last emperor of an unambiguously united Empire. In the immediate aftermath of his death, power was placed in the hands of a new sort of man, the patrician. How did Stilicho set the standard for the behavior of these men in office? With the advent of the patrician, the power and the importance of the emperors themselves generally began to recede. As such, it seems important to examine the ways in which these men related both to the imperial court and to ecclesiastical figures of authority. As to the latter, the relationship of Stilicho and Ambrose was precedent setting in that Stilicho seems to have successfully pressed his claims to legitimacy and to have gained the support of the most powerful bishop in the West, in spite of damning charges that he was a barbarian.

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