



THE LAST
PAGANS
OF ROME
ALAN CAMERON

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Alan Cameron

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For old friends
TDB, GWB, WVH, PEK, JAN
and (once again)
for Carla

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The seeds that eventually grew into this volume were sown in articles I published as long ago as 1966 and 1977. It was in the 1980s that I first had the idea of turning my approach to the so-called pagan reaction into a book, and it was then that I began compiling the information on subscriptions that now fills chapters 12–14. It was also then that I came up with the title, which, as my ideas progressed, has turned out to be more ironic than I originally intended. It would (I suspect) have been a very different book if I had written it then. But I had not yet thought out all the issues to my own satisfaction, and other projects (mostly Greek) beckoned more insistently. Yet I never gave up on the last pagans, and at the turn of the millennium decided that the moment had come to pick up the threads again. The last decade or so has not only seen much important new work, but also the unexpected discovery of important new texts.

I have incorporated radically revised versions of three early articles, and substantially revised and updated the unpublished drafts of chapters 12–14. I more than once toyed with the idea of publishing the material on subscriptions separately, but in the end decided that, despite their bulk, they formed an essential part of the argument of *Last Pagans*, a perspective that would have been lost in a separate publication. All the rest has been written in the last few years. Chapters 17–18 were added at a late stage, provoked by the continuing emphasis in recent continental scholarship on the entirely lost (and surely trivial) history of Nicomachus Flavianus. At first I thought of publishing them separately, but given the ever increasing importance accorded this history in modern writing on the “pagan reaction,” they too belong in this book.

My debt to the published work of Alföldi, Barnes, Bloch, Brown, Chastagnol and Paschoud (among many others) will be obvious. Many friends have sent me books and offprints, supplied information, commented on drafts or discussed problems with me over many years. I think particularly of Tim Barnes, Glen Bowersock, Christopher Jones, Franca Ela Consolino, Bob Kaster, Arnaldo Marcone, John North, Lellia Cracco Ruggini, Rita Lizzi Testa, Michele Salzman, Peter Schmidt, and Jim Zetzel. I am especially grateful to Michele for organizing a symposium on my views in May 2008 (and to Carmela Franklin for hosting it at the American Academy in Rome); and to Tim for generously taking the time to give the entire penultimate version of the manuscript a thorough critical reading, saving me from many errors.

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The Last Pagans of Rome

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INTRODUCTION

The ruin of paganism, in the age of Theodosius, is perhaps the only example of the total extirpation of any ancient and popular superstition; and may therefore deserve to be considered, as a singular event in the history of the human mind

—*Gibbon, Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Ch. xviii*

The last pagans of my title are the nobles of late fourth-century Rome. Although they spent their days moving between their grand Roman mansions and a variety of suburban villas, the oldest families owned estates all over Italy, North Africa, and many other parts of the empire, thus controlling the lives of hundreds of thousands. In the region of Hippo, according to Augustine, people said that if one particular noble converted, “no pagans would be left.”¹ Sermons of the age constantly exhort landowners to destroy pagan shrines on their land (Conclusion). Prudentius singled out for special mention the first noble families to convert to the new faith (Ch. 5. 2). Biographies of the ascetic saints of the age always stress the rank and wealth repudiated by their heroes, from the younger Melania to Honoratus of Arles.² While insisting that it was of no importance, Jerome fantasized that his aristocratic groupies were descended from Camillus and the Scipios.³

We are reasonably sure that by ca. 450 there were few pagan nobles left. But there is very little reliable evidence about the earliest Christians in any given family, no statistics, and no conversion stories. Fortunately, my subject is not so much the conversion of the last pagans,⁴ as how long they survived and what they did to defend the old cults. It is widely believed that pagans remained in a majority in the aristocracy till at least the 380s, and continued to remain a powerful force well into the fifth century (Ch. 5). On this basis the main focus of much modern scholarship has been on their supposedly stubborn resistance to Christianity. Rather surprisingly, they have been transformed from the arrogant, philistine land-grabbers most of them were into fearless champions of senatorial privilege, literature lovers, and aficionados of classical (especially Greek) culture as well as the traditional cults. The dismantling of this romantic myth is one of the main goals of this book.

1. *Ille nobilis, si Christianus esset, nemo remaneret paganus*, Aug. *Enarr. in Ps.* 54. 13.

2. *Vita Melaniae*, passim; Hilarius, *Vita Honorati* 4. 2.

3. Jerome, *Epp.* 54. 1, 4; 108. 1, 34.

4. Now treated in detail, from various angles, by Salzman 2002: see too Ch. 5. 2.

The idea that the aristocracy of Rome spearheaded a “pagan revival” at the end of the fourth century, culminating in a “last pagan stand” defeated at the battle of the river Frigidus, dies hard. The nature of the problem has changed in many ways following the reassessment of the cultural and religious life of late antiquity initiated by Peter Brown. But the thesis so eloquently expounded more than sixty years ago by Andrew Alföldi⁵ and Herbert Bloch⁶ lives on, if in modified form, in even the most recent histories of the late Roman West by scholars of repute.⁷ More important perhaps, it is a fixture in countless more general books that allude in passing to the end of paganism. To cite only the most recent to come my way, the new English translation of Filippo Coarelli’s archaeological guide to Rome dates the abandonment of the House of the Vestal Virgins to “the defeat of the last champions of paganism near Aquileia in 394.” The context does not call for mention of these “champions.” The battle of the Frigidus (Ch. 3) has simply become the canonical date for the definitive end of Roman paganism.

This view depends less on evidence than on a series of assumptions, many of which continue to be repeated as if established facts. There is only one narrative chapter (Ch. 2), describing the successive measures taken against paganism by Constantius II, Gratian, and Theodosius I. The other chapters reexamine these assumptions, sometimes (inescapably, given their often unquestioned hold in both popular and scholarly literature) in considerable detail. Readers may be surprised to discover how little evidence there is for this enduring myth—and how much that supports a very different story.

There has been much loose talk of pagan “revival,” but it is not clear what form this revival is supposed to have taken. The term itself might suggest an increase in the number of pagans. But the 380s and 390s were undoubtedly a period when the pace of conversion to Christianity was accelerating (Ch. 5). “It is well known,” claims one recent book, “that there was a resurgence of pagan activities and sympathy at Rome during the years 392–394.”⁸ What sort of activities? What kind of sympathy? A series of dedications by aristocrats from a single site of the Magna Mater in Rome is sometimes interpreted as a revival of “oriental” cults, which are held to have been what really drove the last pagans to take up arms in defense of the old ways. But the initiations they attest are more like a sort of upper-class freemasonry than cults with a genuine following (Ch. 4. 2). Sometimes “pagan revival” functions as a shorthand for the revival of secular literature in fourth-century Rome (Ch. 11). To be sure, Claudian and Ammianus were both pagans, but Claudian at any rate wrote for Christian patrons. Indeed, the late fourth- and early fifth-century West is rightly seen as the golden age of Christian literature, poetry no less than prose (Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, Paulinus, Prudentius...).

5. Alföldi 1937, 1943, 1948, 1952, and many articles.

6. Bloch 1945; 1963; Bloch 1945 is the standard treatment (he lived till 2006: obituary by Jones 2008).

7. Potter 2004, 532; Demandt 2007, 166; Mitchell 2007, 88–89; van Dam 2007, 349; Coarelli 2007, 86. The most extreme recent example is Hedrick 2000.

8. Hunter 2007, 20.

Three aristocrats in particular have been identified as the core of a continuing pagan opposition: Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, Q. Aurelius Symmachus, and Nicomachus Flavianus,⁹ all holders of priesthoods in the state cults. The most influential single source for this supposed opposition, often identified as the “circle of Symmachus,” is Macrobius’s *Saturnalia*, a dialogue in which none other than Praetextatus, Symmachus, and Flavian are the hosts at a symposium attended by a group of aristocrats and scholars who discuss at length such subjects as Vergil’s knowledge of pagan cult (Ch. 16). It used to be taken for granted that Macrobius was himself a member of this pagan opposition. But the circle he depicts, like the “circle of Scipio” represented in Cicero’s *De republica*, is an imaginary creation: the speeches he puts in the mouths of his interlocutors reflect his interests rather than theirs (Ch. 10. 5). Macrobius himself was almost certainly a Christian, and wrote a full half-century after his dramatic date (382). Several chapters are devoted to this important but much misunderstood work (Ch. 7, 10, 15, 16), which tells us more about the anti-paganism of Christian senators in the 430s than the beliefs of pagans in the 380s.¹⁰

It is the political aspect of the supposed pagan revival that has attracted most attention (Ch. 2, 3, 5). In 382, Gratian ordered the altar of Victory removed from the senate house, and withdrew the traditional public subsidies from the state cults. Symmachus led an embassy to court to protest. Two years later, now prefect of Rome, he wrote his celebrated formal appeal to Gratian’s successor, Valentinian II, again asking for the restoration of altar and subsidies, again unsuccessfully. In 391 Theodosius I (it is claimed) decided that the time had come to go beyond these half measures and eliminate paganism. So he issued a comprehensive ban on all forms of non-Christian cult activity, which was rigorously enforced. This was the last straw for pagan aristocrats, who rallied behind the western usurper Eugenius (proclaimed on 22 August 392). In return for their support Eugenius (supposedly) restored both altar and subsidies, leading to a fully fledged revival of paganism at Rome, directed by his praetorian prefect Nicomachus Flavianus.¹¹ Very little of this story survives serious scrutiny.

Flavian’s reputation as the pagan fanatic who “directed” this revival rests almost entirely on the interpretation of a single anonymous poem on the death of an unnamed pagan prefect devoted to exotic pagan cults. From the moment of its discovery in 1868, the prefect was identified as Flavian, and it was inferred that he had revived all the supposedly now forbidden cults mentioned in the poem. Even accepting the identification “revival” would be a stretch since the cults had been banned for barely three years. Nor does the poem say anything about the prefect *reviving* cults; he is simply ridiculed for believing in such nonsense.

9. Hereafter usually Flavian. Throughout this book, I assume that readers will consult *PLRE* for details of careers, even without explicit citations.

10. Study of the *Saturnalia* will in future be greatly facilitated by Kaster’s new Loeb edition (3 volumes, 2010).

11. “Les Flaviens père et fils dirigent à Rome la réaction païenne,” Chastagnol 1962, 242; cf. Piganiol 1975, 293; Matthews 1975, 241–42; Pietri 1976, 438–39, and so on.

More important, the clues in the poem simply do not fit Flavian. New evidence and new arguments prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the prefect is Praetextatus, in which case the poem belongs in 384 rather than 394 (Ch. 8). This decade makes all the difference. For in 384 sacrifice had not yet been forbidden. Dated to 384 it simply provides evidence of permissible pagan practices, not a pagan “revival.” At one stroke we lose not only virtually all the evidence there ever was for a pagan revival in the 390s but also for the belief that Flavian was its ringleader and inspiration.

The only other text that lends any support to the notion of Flavian as pagan paladin is a single paragraph in Rufinus’s *Ecclesiastical History*, which describes him playing the role of *haruspex*, examining the entrails of a sheep before the battle of the Frigidus. This is regularly taken out of its context in Rufinus (where it simply balances Rufinus’s picture of Theodosius no less improbably preparing for battle by praying to the saints) and treated as proof both of the pagan “revival” and Flavian’s fanaticism. The exaggerated attention paid to the Frigidus in modern writings has had another unfortunate consequence (Ch. 3). The battle has been seen as a dramatic clash between paganism and Christianity, and the conclusion drawn that it was Theodosius’s victory at the Frigidus that dealt Roman paganism its deathblow. The pagan revival was over almost as soon as it had begun.¹² This means that Roman paganism has been seen as a phenomenon that had to be suppressed by force. But there is no contemporary evidence that anyone saw the clash between Theodosius and Eugenius as a religious battle at all, and it is most unlikely that the Frigidus made any difference to the status of paganism at Rome. Since it was already in rapid decline by the 390s, it is not surprising that there is a very general correlation between Theodosius’s victory and the decline of paganism (Ch. 2. 4). More generally, there is not a shred of evidence for the often-repeated assertion that the pagan nobility “rallied” to Eugenius’s cause. The truth is that Flavian is the one and only pagan supporter of Eugenius we can actually name.

Flavian is also known to have written a history. Taking his fanaticism as axiomatic, a flood of recent publications has argued that this lost work “must have been” an attack on Christianity, a major source for later historians both Greek and Latin. But there is no reason to believe that it covered the empire at all rather than the Republic; or that it was a detailed political narrative rather than the barest of epitomes, like most fourth-century histories in Latin (Ch. 17–18). If it was so influential, why did not a single word survive?

The most widely held axiom of the “pagan opposition” model is that the aristocracy of Rome “displayed their pagan faith along with their attachment to classical taste” in the art they patronized and the literature they studied, driven by a consuming passion to preserve and propagate “pagan” culture. This is a venerable thesis, reformulated in a more subtle (but no more convincing) way by Robert Markus (taking both

12. “On sait que ce réveil païen fut de courte durée. Il est incontestable que la victoire de Théodose au Frigidus et le suicide de Nicomaque Flavien...ont frappé d’un coup mortel la vieille religion,” Chastagnol 1960, 164.

pagan revival and pagan revolt for granted). According to Markus, the defeat of what he called “the pagan revolt” in 394¹³

could easily have endangered the survival of the classical learning *with which it had been identified*. In the generation after Julian, and especially around the turn of the century, there is a perceptible hardening of attitude among Western Christians toward classical culture. *Classical education had become linked with pagan religion in a new way*. The link was forged in the heat of battle. The fiercely self-conscious vindication of their claims to sole rightful possession of classical culture struck a new note, introduced by the pagan reaction under Julian and renewed, intensified, in the 380s and 390s. What Christians had been ready to accept before 360, they were to question anxiously for the next forty or fifty years.

This emphasis is, I believe, mistaken. It is true enough that Julian was happy to exploit the double connotation (both cult and culture) of the term “Hellene,” and his short-lived attempt to stop Christians teaching the classics implied a pagan monopoly on secular culture. But there was never any serious break in the devotion of Christian members of the Eastern elite to Greek grammatical, rhetorical, and even philosophical culture. Gregory Nazianzen at once repudiated Julian’s attempt to appropriate Hellenism for pagans, and there is no sign of the sort of long-term anxiety about classical culture Markus suggested among cultivated Greek Christians of the fifth and sixth centuries.

Markus was certainly right to draw attention to a marked hostility to “pagan” (better secular) culture in Jerome, Paulinus of Nola, Augustine, and a few other western Christians (all of them highly cultivated men themselves). There was indeed a wave of asceticism that swept through the Christian aristocracy in the last decades of the fourth century. But it is a mistake to connect this hostility on the Christian side with the cultural activities of contemporary pagans. There is no evidence of any sort that pagans themselves felt called upon to defend their culture—or indeed that they saw it as “pagan” culture at all rather than the culture shared by all educated people. For while a few prominent Christian intellectuals attacked the classics (while ostentatiously quoting them in their own writings), lay Christian members of the elite continued to enjoy an education that consisted entirely of the classics. Symmachus, the only pagan aristocrat of the period whose writings allow us to form some impression of his culture, turns out to have been less well read than many of his Christian peers (Ch. 11, 14). There is no indication that he saw himself as a sponsor of a literary revival of any sort, much less a pagan revival. Least of all did he champion a revival of Greek culture (Ch. 15).

One of the most enduring (and improbable) assumptions, constantly repeated not only by historians but also in works on the history of scholarship and the

13. Markus 1974, 131 (my italics).

transmission of classical texts, is that pagan aristocrats of the period “devoted their ample leisure . . . to reading, copying and editing the texts of the classics.”¹⁴ The evidence—notes known as “subscriptions” in manuscripts of classical texts—is abundant, but should be interpreted in an entirely different and actually far more interesting and instructive sense. In order to establish this point I have assembled a complete dossier of subscriptions, Greek as well as Latin, in Christian as well as pagan texts, and reconsidered the copying and reading of texts in late antiquity (Ch. 12–14).

The traditional interpretation of these subscriptions has always formed the core of the widespread modern belief in a “classical revival” in late fourth-century Rome, sponsored by literature-loving pagan nobles. But it is difficult to know what could constitute anything so general as a “classical” revival. The most influential texts (Vergil, Terence, Cicero, Sallust) never fell out of favor and did not need to be revived. What did the late fourth century consider classical? If there was a revival of any period of Latin literature during these years, it is what we moderns would call the post-classical—Lucan, Statius, Juvenal (Ch. 11). The notion of a “classical revival” is particularly dear to art historians, who use it to explain any manifestations of “classicizing” style in the art of the age (Ch. 19).

The most learned, lively, brilliant, and colorful of my predecessors was Andrew Alföldi, whom I was privileged to know slightly in his old age.¹⁵ In addition to an intimate knowledge of all the relevant texts, he was able to adduce as much again from the material culture of the age. I do not myself believe that more than a fraction of this material actually belongs to what Alföldi liked to think of as a fierce battle between the pagan aristocrats of Rome and the Christian state, but it certainly illustrates what I would prefer to call the secular culture of the age, a culture that imposed itself on cultivated Christians and so rightly belongs in this book. A number of chapters deal with the culture, both literary and artistic, of fourth- and early fifth-century Rome.

The first documented clash between the senate of Rome and the imperial court did not come till 357, when the altar of Victory was first removed from the senate house by Constantius II. Yet Alföldi had no doubt that the hostility of pagan senators to Christianity went all the way back to Constantine. Constantine’s conversion, he insisted, “must have hit the Roman aristocracy amazingly hard,” and from that moment they were engaged in a bitter struggle with one Christian court after another.¹⁶ According to Krautheimer, “contemporary writings” suggest that Constantine’s purpose in building his first large Roman church, S. Giovanni in Laterano, so far from the city centre was “to avoid or minimize friction with a strong pagan opposition headed by the senate and old families.”¹⁷ There are no such writings, just the

14. So even Markus 1974, 130, one of the most intelligent students of late antique culture.

15. See his delightfully patronizing dismissal of an early article of mine (Alföldi 1965/66, 83 n. 111), expressing his confidence that I would soon see that he was right.

16. Alföldi 1937, 1943, 1948, 1952, and many articles.

17. R. Krautheimer 1983, 2.

assumption that a Christian emperor “must have” wanted to replace the pagan temples of Rome with Christian churches.¹⁸ But it is important to bear in mind Van Dam’s recent warning that “before Constantine was a Christian emperor, he was a typical emperor.”¹⁹ The fact is that he exploited the monumental centre of Rome as a typical emperor.²⁰ There was no reason in principle for pagans to see Constantine’s conversion as a threat. Rome had after all absorbed one new cult after another over the centuries. The most recent pre-Christian innovation in the religious sphere had been Aurelian’s devotion to the cult of the Sun, which had led to the building of a splendid new temple, commemorative games, and the creation of a new college of *pontifices*, subsequently distinguished from the old ones as *pontifices Solis*.²¹ Symmachus would surely have been satisfied with a compromise that added a college of *pontifices Christi*. He would not perhaps have wished to join this college himself, but would have been perfectly happy if his friend Praetextatus, notoriously curious about mystery cults, had done so.

An important new argument against the idea of a pagan opposition going back to the age of Constantine has recently been advanced by John Weisweiler. A small group of dedications on the bases of statues erected to fourth-century aristocrats in the Forum Romanum or Forum of Trajan (the two most important public spaces in late antique Rome) include a brief imperial letter authorizing the award of the statue and praising its recipient.²² The earliest known example is a letter of Constantine granting the statue erected to L. Aradius Proculus while prefect of Rome in 337. Then we have the posthumous gold statue erected to Avianius Symmachus in 376, where the dedication refers to an “attached oration” (*adposita oratione*) inscribed on a now lost part of the base. The best known is the letter of Valentinian III that survives complete on the base of the statue erected to the elder Flavian in 431, on his rehabilitation (Ch. 6. 3). We also have fragments of two further imperial letters on the statue bases of two other fourth-century prefects of Rome, one of them perhaps [Ru]fius [Albinus], prefect of Rome in 389–91.

On the death of Praetextatus, Symmachus, in his capacity as city prefect, asked Valentinian II to grant permission for statues to the great man, explicitly requesting some words of praise from the emperor himself: “for praise is all the more illustrious if it comes from a celestial judgment” (*caelesti . . . iudicio*: the imperial letter on Avianius Symmachus’s monument is characterized as a *perenne iudicium*).²³ In light of the texts

18. Too much attention has been paid to Zosimus’s garbled story (ii. 29. 5, with Paschoud 2000, 234–40; and Frascchetti 1999, 76–134) that Constantine refused to ascend the Capitol to sacrifice and “incurred the hatred of the senate and people,” whereupon he decided to found a new capital of his own. No one can agree which of his three Roman visits is meant (312, 315, or 326), and the motive for the foundation of Constantinople is absurd.

19. van Dam 2007, 11.

20. Curran 2000, 71.

21. Watson 1999, Ch. 11; unfortunately, nothing remains of the temple.

22. Weisweiler 2010. I am grateful to the author for showing me a copy of this important paper before publication.

23. *Rel.* 12. 4.

assembled here, there can be little doubt that Symmachus was asking for a brief imperial testimonial to include on Praetextatus's statue base.²⁴

In the early empire it was only provincial grandees, people who in the ordinary way would never see an emperor, who solicited and prized letters from the emperor and had them inscribed on their monuments. But by the fourth century, when Roman aristocrats no longer enjoyed regular intercourse with the normally absent emperor, "closeness to imperial power became a more precious commodity," and a brief imperial testimonium inscribed on a statue base evidently added to the standing of even the most blue-blooded aristocrat. What is so intriguing about the surviving texts is that all those who can be identified are prominent pagans, people generally thought of as members of a pagan opposition. This must be coincidence; we can hardly doubt that similar letters adorned the statue bases of distinguished Christians. But it is nonetheless striking that members of the leading pagan families of the age all put so high a premium on the commendation of a now Christian emperor. And scarcely less striking that Christian emperors were so willing to flatter the vanity of pagan nobles.

All too often critics both ancient and modern have seen the Christianization of the Roman world in terms of conflict. Fifty years ago, a famous series of lectures was held at the Warburg Institute under the title *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*.²⁵ While late antique Christians certainly saw themselves as engaged in a battle with paganism, what is much less clear is whether pagans saw themselves fighting a battle against Christianity. The military metaphor implies that one side hopes to vanquish the other. Yet while militant Christians undoubtedly cherished hopes of stamping paganism out, and from the early fifth century on explicitly worked toward this end (Conclusion), there was no battle that pagans either could or perhaps even wanted to win. What sort of "victory" could they have hoped for? Many must have wished that Christianity had never entered the world, but by the 380s no one can have imagined that it would disappear. Most (certainly Symmachus, on the evidence of his speech on the altar of Victory) simply asked for coexistence, to be allowed to maintain the state cults. It is not even certain that all pagans felt it necessary to maintain blood sacrifice (Ch. 2. 4).

More than a century ago Samuel Dill justly remarked that "it would be a mistake to suppose that in general society the line between the two camps was sharply drawn."²⁶ Ignoring this warning, many scholars have assumed that pagans and Christians were constantly at each other's throats. One trivial illustration. Symmachus was annoyed when what he describes as "jealousy or ingratitude" robbed him of the normal honor of public statues after his proconsular year in Africa (373/74). His successor, Paulus Constantius, as it happens, is known to have been a Christian. So it is assumed that it

24. Presumably the emperor sometimes granted the request without including words of praise suitable for inscription.

25. Momigliano 1963.

26. Dill 1899, 12.

was because Symmachus was a pagan that Constantius blocked his statues.²⁷ But there is no evidence that Constantius was the guilty party, or, even if he was, that his obstructionism was due to the religious factor. It was not till much later that Symmachus emerged (briefly) as a pagan champion. The notion that any Christian would routinely do down any pagan (or vice versa) whenever he had a chance is entirely gratuitous. A subtle article by John Matthews has shown that, like many other aristocrats, Symmachus was engaged in feuds and quarrels throughout his life, on a variety of issues, social, economic, and purely personal.²⁸

Pagan aristocrats play a large part in this book. Chapter 1 will justify the term “pagan.” Here a few words on aristocrats. Both term and concept are modern, with no exact Latin equivalent. The closest is *nobilis*, variously defined (under the Republic, consuls and descendants of consuls; in the late empire, consuls or holders of the urban or praetorian prefecture). But such definitions do not capture the essence of aristocracy. As Chris Wickham has put it, an aristocrat is “a member of a (normally landed) political elite...who could wield some sort of power simply because of who he...was.”²⁹ Sex. Petronius Probus and Q. Aurelius Symmachus, enormously wealthy landowners descended from generations of consuls, were undoubtedly aristocrats on this definition, destined to be VIPs from birth. But the historian Aurelius Victor, who rose from humble beginnings to become prefect of Rome, was not. Despite his illustrious office, Probus and Symmachus would not have recognized him as their social peer. A perfect ancient definition of aristocrat in this sense is offered by the first line of Probus’s epitaph: *dives opum, clarusque genus, praecelsus honore* (wealthy, well born and distinguished in rank).³⁰ A new man like Victor could lay a (rather modest) claim to only the last of these titles.

In her comprehensive recent study, Michele Salzman employs the terms “senator” and “aristocrat” interchangeably, at one point explicitly stating that she uses the term “senatorial aristocracy...to refer to all holders of the senatorial rank of *clarissimus*.”³¹ While perfectly acceptable in itself, this usage blurs the distinction between run-of-the-mill senators and the old aristocracy, a distinction that is important for this book. By ca. 400 new policies initiated by Constantine and continued by his successors had enormously expanded the senate, until “there were something like 3000 jobs in each half of the empire leading more or less directly to senatorial status.”³² The many newer members were inevitably of more modest stock, less likely than scions of noble families to hew to the traditional cults.³³ More important, it was scions of the noble families who monopolized the many priesthoods in the traditional cults (Ch. 4). So

27. *Ep.* ix. 115; so Chastagnol 1962, 221; against, Matthews 1971, 122–23.

28. Matthews in Paschoud 1986, 163–75; see too Sogno 2006.

29. Gelzer 1969; Barnes 1974, 444–49; Badel 2005, 90–94; Wickham 2005, 153–257 at 153.

30. *CLE* 1347; Trout 2000.

31. Salzman 2002, 4, and *passim*.

32. Heather, in *CAH* 13(1998), 191; for a useful summary of the evidence, Chastagnol 1976, 51–69.

33. As recognized by Salzman 2002, 14.

even if Ambrose's famous claim that Christians enjoyed a majority in the senate in 384 is anywhere near the truth, that need not mean that a majority of the old families were now Christian. A new man like Aurelius Victor would never have been co-opted into one of the ancient priestly colleges simply because he was a pagan. It was from the ranks of the old aristocracy that we might expect to find reluctance to embrace Christianity, not the senate as a whole.

In consequence, this book employs the term "aristocrat" more narrowly and precisely than Salzman, to designate members of the old families, not any and all members of the senatorial order. From time to time I also employ the more general term "elite," normally to designate educated, comfortably off people who could not boast noble birth and did not aspire to (or at any rate win) positions in the imperial service. For example, on this definition Lactantius and Libanius, Ammianus, and the young Augustine, though not aristocrats or even senators, were members of the (or an) elite.

Roman paganism petered out with a whimper rather than a bang. But in minimizing the "pagan reaction," it should not be thought that my purpose is to belittle the last pagans, to dismiss them, in the vivid characterization of a recent critic, as "spinelessly self-regarding."³⁴ What this book attacks is less their failure to mount the defiant opposition of modern legend than the assumption that nobles like Praetextatus, Symmachus, and Flavian, in their capacity as priests of the state cults, must (or should) have seen it as their duty to do everything in their power to resist the encroachment of Christianity. But *pontifices* were not chosen by and did not represent the pagans of Rome in the way bishops were chosen by and represented the Christian community. There were in addition dozens of them, with no obvious leader, all landowners and officeholders first and priests second. Since most acquired their priesthoods in their teens or early twenties by virtue of birth (Ch. 4), it is unlikely that they saw themselves, or were seen by others, as the pagan champions they are depicted in modern works. It was not because he was an uncompromising pagan warrior that Symmachus was selected to head the embassy of 382 and write his famous speech of 384, but because he was known to be a moderate who enjoyed good relations with prominent Christians (Ch. 2. 1). Nor does his abundant correspondence suggest that he took any personal steps to further the pagan cause, by lobbying fellow aristocrats or court connections privately. Remarkably enough, his letters never so much as mention the withdrawal of cult subsidies or the altar of Victory (Ch. 2. 1). What the letters (and speeches) do show is that his main interests in life were networking, serving on embassies, and promoting the interests of his family (Sogno 2006). So shrewd a politician must have seen that by the 380s there was no battle pagans could hope to win.

34. So McLynn 2009, 572, citing Cameron 1999.

If the pagan aristocracy of Rome did not after all mount a defiant political and cultural rear-guard action, what did they do? For a while they continued to preside over the traditional cults, holding office, managing their estates, and occasionally reading a classical text in a cool seaside villa (Ch. 10. 6). When the government withdrew the funds necessary for public cults, they protested. When it became clear that protests were not going to achieve anything, it was only a matter of time before the remaining pagan nobles converted, less because of coercion and laws, than as the only way to continue holding office and preserve their ancestral role in Roman public life. Holding priesthoods in the state cults had brought them prestige—so long as those cults were the only game in town.³⁵ But even before the closing of the temples in 391, the writing was on the wall. It was now the church people were flocking to, and if the nobility was going to maintain its position, they too had to join the church, where their wealth and connections enabled them to maintain their traditional ascendancy, if in rather different ways (and continue to read the occasional classical text in the same villas).³⁶ Last-ditch resistance would have led to political suicide, and there were no pagan martyrs.

Paradoxically, perhaps in fact predictably, the Symmachi were to become one of the leading families in a now Christian Rome. Symmachus cos. 391 died a pagan, but his grandson, great-grandson, and great-great-grandson all became consuls (in 446, 485, and 522). It is frustrating that we know nothing about his son Memmius Symmachus beyond the age of eighteen in 402. He was brought up a pagan (p. 378), but there can be little doubt that he (or at latest his son, the future consul of 446) eventually abandoned the family paganism in order to further the family fortunes. A nephew, Aurelius Anicius Symmachus, who in all other respects followed the traditional career (proconsul of Africa and prefect of the city), evidently had one Anician parent and was already a Christian by 418–20.³⁷ Aurelius Memmius Symmachus cos. 485 was a pillar of the Christian establishment.

35. North 1992, 174–93.

36. See (e.g.) C. Pietri 1976; L. Pietri 2002, 253–63; Cooper and Hillner 2007.

37. Chastagnol, *Fastes* 281; C. Pietri 1976, 456–57.

PAGANS AND POLYTHEISTS

How did Latin *paganus* come to acquire its most famous meaning? The earliest documented meaning was apparently “rural,” from *pagus*, a rural district. But to judge from surviving texts, the dominant meaning by the early empire was “civilian,” as opposed to “military.” Finally, soon after the middle of the fourth century, quite suddenly we find it as the standard Latin designation for non-Christians. It is less well known that by as early as the first century the word had passed into Greek (παγανός), where it still survives in the modern language—but only in the second of these three meanings.¹ How did the religious sense develop?² And why did it not develop in Greek?

Medieval writers assumed the rural derivation, on the ground that pagan practices tended to linger longest in the countryside.³ So Baronius (1586), assuming that Christians dismissed nonbelievers contemptuously as country bumpkins. This seems to be the dominant view today.⁴ Yet there are major objections. In the first place, this is not a perspective likely to have occurred to anyone as early as the fourth century, when, at any rate in the Latin-speaking western provinces, the primary and most conspicuous focus of paganism was still the city cults, presided over by the city elites, above all (as we shall see) in Rome itself.⁵ Second, *paganus* is never used like *rusticus* or *agrestis* for “coarse” or “uncouth.”⁶ Notoriously, *rusticitas* stands for lack of polish and sophistication in Ovid,⁷ but his one use of *paganus*, in a brief account of a rural festival, is entirely respectful.⁸ Three examples in Apuleius all carry the sense “villagers” or “locals,” again

1. *LSJ*, Lampe and Preisigke, s.v. παγανός, παγανικός, παγανεύω; H. Cuvigny and G. Wagner, *ZPE* 62 (1986), at 66–67 and P. Oxy. 3758, dated to 325; Grégoire and Orgels 1952, at 363–400.

2. Zeiller 1917; for more texts and a more systematic classification, Flury in *TLL* x. 1 (1982), 78–83 (add Aug. *Ep.* 11. 5. 2 Divjak and many examples in the new sermons published by F. Dolbeau); Mohrmann 1965, 277–89; Bickel 1954, 1–47; Demougeot 1956, 337–50; O’Donnell 1977, 163–69; Chuvin 2002, 7–15; Kahlos 2007, 22–26.

3. Le Goff 1980, 92–94.

4. “the term *pagani*, meaning inhabitants of the rural *pagi*, became synonymous with non-Christians,” C. R. Whittaker, *CAH* xiii (1998), 308; Fowden 1993 and Athanassiadi/Frede 1999 below; Kahlos 2002, 6.

5. See (e.g.), Rives 1995; rural cults may have been more prominent in the East: Lane Fox 1987, 41–46.

6. So rightly Bickel 1954, 26–27; the closest example is Pliny, *NH* 28. 28.

7. Hollis 1977, 129–30.

8. *Pagus agat festum: pagum lustrate, coloni, / et date paganis annua liba focus*, Ov. *Fasti* i. 669–70; *annua pastorum convivia, lusus in urbe, / cum pagana madent fercula divitiis*, Propertius iv. 4. 75–76.

without a hint of condescension. When Sidonius describes his style as “not urban(e) elegance but rural simplicity” (*non urbanus lepos...sed pagana simplicitas*), he is claiming a virtue (albeit disingenuously), not a vice.⁹ Finally, after a handful of references (again never pejorative) in technical literature like land surveyors and antiquarians such as Festus, by late antiquity this sense simply disappears from the everyday language.¹⁰ More generally, it would be paradoxical if western Christians had called pagans by a name symbolizing lack of culture when eastern Christians called them by a name symbolizing culture itself (“hellene”).

In support of the “civilian” derivation (which goes back to Alciati in 1582), Harnack drew attention to the widespread notion of Christians as soldiers of Christ, complemented by Christian reluctance to serve in the Roman army in the period before Constantine.¹¹ No Latin writer refers to Christians as *militēs Christi* more often or emphatically than Tertullian. In his *De fuga in persecutione* of (probably) 208/9, successive chapters first compare Christians to soldiers and Christ to their general (*imperator*), and then distinguish bishops, priests, and deacons as officers (*duces*) from the “common soldiers” (*gregarius miles*), namely the laity.¹² If *paganus* had acquired its religious sense by 200, we should certainly have expected to find it somewhere in the fourteen hundred surviving pages of Tertullian. Yet in this sense he only uses *gentes*, *nationes*, and *ethnici* (note the title of his two-book *Ad nationes* = “Against [or addressed to] the pagans”). *Paganus* he uses just twice, both times clearly in the sense “civilian.” At *De corona militis* 11 he claims that, in the eyes of the Lord, “a civilian who believes counts as a soldier, just as a soldier who believes counts as a civilian” (*apud hunc tam miles est paganus fidelis, quam paganus est miles fidelis*), which can only mean that Christ makes no distinction between soldier and civilian. How could he have written this if he had thought of *paganus* as implying “pagan”?¹³

Here too there are chronological objections. By the time the religious sense emerges in the mid-fourth century, Roman armies were beginning to be manned by Christians, and the Christian public, no longer a threatened minority, must have been ceasing to see itself as a militant movement. In any case, while in most of the thirty odd texts there is a clear contrast between civilian and soldier, there is never any suggestion of *hostility* between them. It makes no sense to see civilians as the *enemy* of these “soldiers of Christ.” Soldiers are supposed to protect the civilian population. And if the religious sense is a natural extension of the civilian sense, why did it never develop in the Greek-speaking East, where *paganós* = civilian was firmly established?

On the “civilian” etymology, we should have expected *paganus* = pagan to develop earlier, on the “rustic” etymology, later. Of course, a new usage is likely to

9. Sidon. *Epp.* viii. 16. 3.

10. Naturally, we continue to find occasional examples in documents distinguishing between the inhabitants of *pagi* and *vici*: for example, *universi pagani seu vicani*, *AE* 1937, 121, l. 3 (dated to 18: xii: 335).

11. On both these points see Harnack 1981/1905.

12. *De fuga* 10–11; for the date, Barnes 1971, 47.

13. Not a rhetorical question, since some scholars have in fact argued precisely this: Grégoire and Orgels 1952, 388 (“*il est stupéfiant que...*”); Demougeot 1961, 354–65.

develop well before it is first recorded in datable surviving texts. But the distribution of *paganus* = pagan is peculiarly abundant and precisely dated: more than six hundred examples in at least fifteen different writers and texts datable between ca. 360 and 420 (476 in Augustine alone).¹⁴ With only one exception (an inscription discussed in detail below), nothing earlier. We would surely have expected at least one or two earlier examples if this meaning had been known to such prolific Christian writers of the third or early fourth centuries as Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, or Lactantius. Even after 360, some cultivated Christians never use it, at least in their writings. In his two detailed letters about the altar of Victory in 384, Ambrose uses *gentiles* nineteen times and *gentes* six times, never *paganus*, nor anywhere else in his abundant surviving writings. The so-called Ambrosiaster, writing in the 380s, uses *paganus* more than fifty times. Sulpicius Severus never uses *paganus*. Augustine (who nonetheless used the word freely) in two passages adds the qualification “those whom we have grown accustomed to call *gentiles* or, in the popular usage, *pagani*.” We find the same formula in a law of 409 (*quos vulgo paganos appellat*).¹⁵ Apparently, it was felt to be a popular, vulgar, or at any rate recent usage, not a term that educated people were willing to use without apology.¹⁶

All the other terms Latin-speaking Christians used for non-Christians were adapted from words Greek-speaking Jews had used for the *goyim*, the gentiles, from at least the second century B.C.: *gentes* and *nationes* from ἔθνη, *gentiles* (less often *ethnici*) from *ethnikoi*, *infideles* from *apistoi*.¹⁷ All were words with distinctly hostile connotations. The more neutral “hellene” is a usage that goes back to the age of the Maccabees, when the hostile world of the gentiles was represented by the Seleucids.¹⁸ Acts and the Letters of Paul frequently link “Jews and hellenes” as the addressees of early Christian preaching, where “hellenes” is by long-established convention generally rendered “Greeks,” but nonetheless clearly denotes non-Christians rather than just Greek-speakers. Since the earliest converts were mostly Jews, this made sense to start with. But before long most Christians in the Greek-speaking provinces of the early empire were ethnically or at any rate linguistically Greeks, and “hellene” = non-Christian might have seemed paradoxical. Yet in the late antique East it emerged as the most widely used term of all.¹⁹ This is because it came to encapsulate early Christian hostility to Greek culture, adumbrated in some passages of Paul but elaborately, not to say passionately, developed by the second-century Apologists.²⁰ Nonetheless, by the time

14. Figures from the Brepols online database; the next highest totals are in Ambrosiaster (54) and Filastrius (41).

15. Aug. *Ep.* 184bis. 3. 5 and in *Retract.* ii. 43. 1; *Cod. Theod.* xvi. 5. 46 (409), quoted below.

16. That is to say, Ambrose, Severus, and Jerome may have used it in conversation, but simply avoided it when writing.

17. See Bauer/Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* 3 ed. (2000), s.v. ἄπιστος 2, ἔθνος 2. a, ἔθνικός.

18. See the texts quoted in Bauer/Danker 2000, s.v. Ἑλλην 2. a and related words; Schürer 1979, 81–84.

19. Many examples cited by Jüthner 1923, 97–99, with n. 258 on 146–47; briefly, Bowersock 1990, 9–11; Sandwell 2007, 149; and (of course) Lampe s. vv. all the ἑλλην-words.

20. Ἑλλην = pagan is largely absent from the so-called Apostolic Fathers (E. J. Goodspeed, *Index Patristicus* [Leipzig 1907], s.v.), but becomes common in Aristides, Athenagoras and Tatian (see the useful index to Daniel Ruiz Bueno, *Padres Apologistas Griegos* [Madrid 1954], 935).

Christianity came to penetrate educated members of the elite, Greek was inescapably the language of Christian theology. Inevitably, the earlier outright hostility to classical culture became somewhat muted. Basil of Caesarea wrote an influential treatise on the profit Christian youths could draw from “hellenic literature,”²¹ and the writings of the Christian Byzantines were to develop into perhaps the most learned and allusive literature ever produced. In consequence the word lost many of its pejorative associations, to the extent that more aggressive pagans, notably the Apostate Julian, defiantly and proudly embraced the equation *hellene* = pagan.²² At the same time, unsurprisingly in an empire where many different languages were spoken, *hellene*-words continued to be used to identify Greek-speakers, particularly the verb *hellēnizo*, which was nonetheless just as regularly used of those who engaged in pagan practices. Obviously the context must always have been felt sufficient to distinguish these radically different senses, both of which persevered for another thousand years, till the end of the Byzantine world.²³

As for Latin, while *ethnē* translated well enough (*gentes* and *nationes*),²⁴ for obvious reasons “hellene” did not. It made little sense to apply *Graecus* to a Latin-speaking western pagan who may not have even known Greek, and it is easy to see why *Graecus* = pagan failed to catch on in the West. We do in fact find a handful of examples in western writers familiar with Greek usage, evidently aware that they were using paradoxical terminology—in almost every case, instructively enough, glossed by *paganus*. In his commentary on Galatians 2. 3, where Paul calls his companion Titus a hellene (apparently in the ethnic sense),²⁵ Marius Victorinus notes “he was a Greek, that is to say pagan” (*Graecus erat, id est paganus*). A couple of pages later (ib. 4. 3) we find “among Greeks, that is to say among pagans” (*apud Graecos, id est apud paganos*). Even more explicit: “Greeks, whom they call hellenes or pagans.”²⁶ Victorinus was writing ca. 360, the earliest firmly datable literary texts to use *paganus* = pagan, as well as the earliest known examples of *Graecus* = pagan. Further proof of the influence of Greek usage here is his coinage of the noun *paganismus* on the model of *hellenismus*.²⁷ By the early 380s we find *paganos, id est Graecos* in Filastrius of Brescia, together with a bizarre piece of Latinized Greek mythology that derives the word from “King Paganus, as the Greek poet Hesiod says” (*Pagano rege... ut ait Hesiodus Graecus poeta*)!²⁸ Hesiod, of course,

21. Πρὸς τοὺς νέους ὄπως ἂν ἐξ ἑλληνικῶν ὠφέλοιντο λόγων, to give the work its full Greek title.

22. But by no means all pagans: Cameron 1993, 25–29; see too Bouffartigue 1991, 251–66.

23. See the Ἑλλην-words in E. Trapp, *Lexikon zur byzantinischen Gräzität* (Vienna 2001). Syriac had different words for “pagan” and “Greek,” and so translators of late antique texts into Syriac “were able to make a clear verbal distinction between Greeks (and Greek culture) and paganism (and pagan cults)” (Bowersock 1990, 11).

24. For *gentes* in Latin, Löfstedt, *Late Latin* (1959), 74–75.

25. Evidently not realizing that Ἕλληνη here means that Titus was an ethnic Greek (rather than a Jew), Chrysostom (*Hom. in Gal.* 2. 3) explained what he took to be a reference to paganism in this passage as meaning that Titus “was born of Hellenic [i.e., pagan] parents.”

26. *Graeci, quos Ἑλληνας vel paganos vocant, De homoousio recipiendo* 1. 13, p. 278 Henry/Hadot.

27. In his note on Galatians 4. 9.

28. Most of these texts are cited in full by Zeiller 1917, 79–80, 83–84; see too Chuvin 2002, 8–9.

had traced the (ethnic) hellenes back to King *Hellen*, son of Deucalion and Pyrrha.²⁹ Somewhat later, we still find the occasional example in Augustine (*Graecos, quos etiam paganus dicimus*).³⁰ Remarkably enough, the earliest datable writers to use *paganus* in this sense all treat it as the exact Latin equivalent of hellene = pagan.

This equivalence seems to have been generally recognized by translators. We find another example of *paganismus* in the Latin translation of Athanasius's *Life of St. Anthony* by Evagrius of Antioch, written between ca. 362 and 373,³¹ where *ad paganismum* is a direct translation of *eis hellēnismōn* in Athanasius. Then we have two examples in the old Latin translation of the twenty-fourth canon of the Council of Ancyra in 314, once again representing *hellēnismōs* in the Greek original.³² The same (probably fifth-century) translator also comes up with *paganizo* to represent *hellēnizo* in the sense "lapse into pagan ways."³³ Early in the fifth century Rufinus translated the title of Justin Martyr's lost *Pros Hellenas* as *Contra paganos*.³⁴ Even more instructive is Rufinus's translation of a quotation from Porphyry in Eusebius, claiming that the church father Origen was "Ἕλληγιν ἐν Ἑλλήσιν παιδευθεὶς λόγοις, a passage that is not easy to render both accurately and helpfully in any language. Lawlor and Oulton offer "a Greek educated in Greek learning," but this fails to explain why Eusebius goes on to accuse Porphyry of lying when he says (Lawlor and Oulton again) that Origen "came over from the Greeks" (*ex hellēnōn*). Obviously what Porphyry meant was that Origen "came over from the pagans," namely that he was born a pagan. This is clearly how Rufinus understood the passage, translating the first phrase *cum esset paganus et gentilibus, id est Graecorum studiis eruditus*, and the second *de superstitione gentili*.³⁵

Down to the age of Constantine, such originally Jewish terms for enemies of the faith apparently sufficed. Earlier studies have paid insufficient attention to the fact that *paganus* is the one entirely new term to emerge. For those who favor the "rustic" etymology, *paganus* was depreciatory from the start, like all the others. According to Fowden, for example, it was because of its "derogatory" associations that Christians chose a term implying "rusticity." Athanassiadi and Frede gloss the word *peasant, rustic, unlearned*, and Kahlos even detects a "nuance of barbarism."³⁶ For O'Donnell it was "the whole point" of this usage to "address someone like Vettius Agorius Praetextatus as a 'hick' on the ground of a worship shared with men whose boots

29. Merkelbach and West, *Frag. Hesiodica* (1967), 4–5 (citing Filastrius 111 as *Cat. F* 3); most recently, Fowler 1999.

30. Aug. *De opere monach.* 13. 14 (CSEL 41. 555. 16); cf. id. *Quaest. Evang.* 1. 14.

31. *Vita Anton.* 78; for what is known about this work, Herzog and Schmidt 5 (1989), sect. 599. 3.

32. C. H. Turner, *Ecclesiae Occidentalis Monumenta Iuris Antiquissima* II. 1 (1907), 20b and 21a. The Greek original has not survived, but we have more or less complete versions in seven vernaculars: M. Geard, *Clavis Patrum Graecorum* iv (Turnhout 1980), no. 8501.

33. Three times, Turner 1907, 20b and 22a, according to *TLL* x. 1. 78 the only occurrences of the word.

34. Rufin. *Hist. Eccl.* iv. 11. 11 and 18. 13; for the Greek title, Euseb. *Hist. Eccl.* iv. 18. 3–4.

35. Euseb. *Hist. Eccl.* vi. 19. 7 and 9; Rufinus's translation is to be found facing the Greek text in E. Schwartz's *editio maior* (1909; reprinted 1999).

36. Fowden 1993, 38; Athanassiadi and Frede 1999, 4; Kahlos 2002, 6.

squished with more than mud.”³⁷ It is true that one or two Christian writers do exploit these associations. Orosius claims that pagans were so called “from the crossroads and villages of country places,”³⁸ and Prudentius at least once hints at the same idea (*stulte, pago dedite*).³⁹ But ancient writers loved to make etymological puns and jokes, most of them based on wildly speculative and often completely false etymologies.⁴⁰ Not only do these two or three texts (out of more than 600) not prove the “rural” etymology; they do not even prove that contemporaries believed it rather than simply exploited it to make an offensive point. Nor does it make much sense that the term selected as the direct Latin equivalent of hellene should imply rusticity and lack of learning. More important, we have seen that the term was felt to be vulgar or unfamiliar rather than insulting.

As for *paganus* = civilian, the fact that it appears so often in legal texts is enough to disprove the assumption sometimes made of a pejorative connotation here too. Nor is it easy to see any such connotations in Greek *paganós*. As we shall see again in the case of *paganus* = non-Christian, it is important not to confuse a particular context with the word itself. Naturally, it is pejorative when a Roman general in Tacitus tells his troops that they will be *pagani* if they do not win an upcoming battle (where Wellesley neatly renders *pagani* “you are finished as soldiers”).⁴¹ But in most of the thirty relevant texts we are clearly faced with a technical term. One particularly instructive case is a military register dated to A.D. 156 that lists a man who was promoted to centurion *ex pagano*. Obviously most centurions rose through the ranks, but this man was granted the post direct from civilian life, without any military service at all.⁴²

What then are the connotations of *paganus* = non-Christian? Undoubtedly, many of the 600-odd fourth- and early fifth-century texts are very hostile. After all, most Christian writers who mention pagans do so not to praise them, but to criticize their blindness in not accepting the one true faith. Add to this the fact that late imperial laws were written in a ferocious, almost hysterical idiom,⁴³ and inevitably laws forbidding pagan practices share in the violent rhetoric of the genre. But there is no indication that those that specify *pagani* are any more violent than those that name *gentiles* or use some offensive periphrasis (examples below). On rather ill-defined grounds P. Borgomeo argued that *paganus* was a more negative term than *gentilis* for Augustine.⁴⁴ But I can find no unmistakable indication that the word was felt to be pejorative *in and of itself*. What needs accounting for is the appearance of a *new* term. There was no need for yet another pejorative term.

37. O'Donnell 1977, 168.

38. *ex locorum agrestium compitis et pagis*, Oros. *Adv. pag.* i, prol. 9.

39. Prud. *Peristephanon* x. 296; *Cathem.* xi. 85–88 (*sed cum fideli spiritu/concurrat ad praesepia/pagana gens et quadrupes/sapiatque quod brutum fuit*). Possibly too *Contra Symm.* i. 449, *sint haec barbaricis gentilia numina pagis*, though in context *barbaricis* clearly means “of barbarians,” not “barbaric.”

40. For a mass of material on this well-known phenomenon, see O'Hara 1996.

41. Tac. *Hist.* iii. 24, with Wellesley's commentary (Sydney 1972) and Penguin translation (1964).

42. Gilliam 1952, 75–78.

43. MacMullen 1986, 147–66.

44. Borgomeo 1972, 57–73.

On the contrary, by ca. 350, I suggest, Christians had become a sufficiently central and self-confident part of Roman society as a whole for a need to be felt for a *less* overtly polemical term to denote non-Christians. Even at the purely philological level, a collective plural like *ethnē/gentes* could not easily be applied to an individual. Latin *gentilis* could, but carried hostile connotations. Up to the age of Constantine, many Christians had looked on the entire Roman establishment as the enemy, and understandably employed sweeping, imprecise collective nouns like *ethnē/gentes* that implied a race apart, a race of persecutors.

But with the end of the persecutions and a Christian on the imperial throne, Christians must have begun to look on the non-Christians around them differently, no longer as automatic enemies but as misguided fellow citizens, fellow Romans in an increasingly dangerous world. Non-Christians were now individuals who lived next door or worked in the same office. Above all, they were converting in unprecedented numbers. The time had come for a less openly pejorative term to denote them. The well-established “hellene” was a word with enough positive associations to fill this role very satisfactorily in Greek, as well as being readily applicable to individuals (Is X a hellene?). In combination these must be the reasons it rapidly became the standard term in the eastern provinces. And we have seen that Marius Victorinus and Filastrius provide evidence of a short-lived attempt, in the period 360–80, to introduce “hellene” into Latin in the form of *graecus*, glossed *paganus*. In the event it was *paganus* that caught on, rapidly followed by a complex of derivatives clearly modeled on the *hellēn*-complex (*paganizo*, *paganismus*, etc.).

Christian preachers and polemicists might continue to denounce unbelievers in the old-fashioned way, but what sort of terms do we find in imperial legislation? It is perhaps more than coincidence that seventeen out of the first eighteen extracts in the chapter of the *Theodosian Code* entitled *De paganis, sacrificiis et templis* (xvi. 10),⁴⁵ running from 320/21 to 399, avoid using any specific term. *Paganus* appears in xvi. 10. 13, from 395, while all the rest are general prohibitions of the form “let no one...” or “we forbid anyone...” But the final six extracts, running from 408 to 435, all use *paganus*. It is surely therefore significant that it is in a law of 409 that we find the apologetic formula *gentiles, quos vulgo paganos appellant* (xvi. 5. 46), implying that, in the eyes of those who drafted imperial laws at any rate, *paganus* = non-Christian was still felt to be a subliterate term. As late as a law of 416 we find the same gloss: those polluted *profano pagani ritus errore, hoc est gentiles* (xvi. 10. 21). Elsewhere in the Code *paganus* = pagan appears as early as a law of 370 (xvi. 2. 18), but in a law of 353 we find an unmistakable example of *paganus* = civilian, one in a series of laws about people winning honorary military rank and then trying to get out of their obligations as decurions or private citizens.⁴⁶ Apart from a single reference in the military writer Vegetius, writing in the 380s or 390s,⁴⁷ this is the latest surviving

45. This chapter title (of course) dates from 438, when the Code was published.

46. *Cod. Theod.* vii. 21. 2.

47. Without training in weapons, *nihil paganus distat a milite*, Veget. ii. 23. 14; for the date, Barnes, *Phoenix* 33 (1979), 254–57; further references in M. D. Reeve’s OCT edition of 2004 (v–x).

example in a literary text of *paganus* = civilian. In most contexts the non-Christian sense obviously now became dominant, at least in Latin. In Greek *paganós*, however, the civilian sense remained dominant. There was no need for a new term for pagan in Greek, where “hellene” had for some time been standard usage.

It is instructive to compare certain similarities in the way *paganus* and “hellene” were used. While “hellene” was regularly applied quite neutrally to non-Christians, at the same time, although the word itself certainly had no pejorative etymology to color its use, a great many of the phrases and contexts in which it appears are grossly and unmistakably pejorative. It is an interesting exercise to compare the usage of the three mid fifth-century ecclesiastical historians, Socrates, Theodoret, and Sozomen. Not only did all three write within a decade of each other; they covered essentially the same period and same subject matter. Yet while Socrates and Sozomen both employ “the hellenes” freely in neutral contexts simply to identify non-Christian groups and activities,⁴⁸ there are few such neutral references in Theodoret. More often than not he uses pejorative periphrases: “those enslaved by impiety,” “those devoted to the deceit of idols,” “idolaters,” “the impious,” “unholy ones.” When he does use “hellene” it is mostly in loaded formulas like “hellenic delusion” or “hellenic thorns.”⁴⁹ We find the same with *paganus*. Laws forbidding pagan practices regularly use formulas like *pagana superstitio* or *profanus pagani ritus error*.⁵⁰ But this owes more to the stock minatory rhetoric of the imperial chancery than to etymology.

Just as with “hellene,” some examples of *paganus* appear to be more or less neutral in tone. Perhaps the clearest illustration is the usage of Optatus of Milevis, in his treatise *Against the Donatists*, written ca. 384 (again among the earliest datable examples of the usage). For example, he glosses Paul’s enigmatic “I planted, Apollos watered” at 1 Corinthians 3. 6 as follows: “I planted—that is, I made a catechumen of a pagan (*hoc est, de pagano catechumenon feci*)—Apollos watered—that is, he baptized the catechumen.”⁵¹ In another chapter he takes issue with the Donatist practice of counting converts previously baptized by Catholic bishops as no different from pagans and baptizing them again:⁵²

By some miracle you [the Donatists] have the audacity to say to each in turn “John Doe or Jane Doe, are you still a pagan” (*Gai Sei, Gaia Seia, adhuc paganus es aut pagana*)?⁵³ A man who has already professed his conversion to God, you

48. See the indexes s.v. the Ἑλλην-words in Hansen 1995; and Bidez and Hansen 1960. Procopius writes of “the so-called Hellenes” (*BP* i. 20. 1; *ib.* 25. 10; *Anecd.* 11. 31; *Aed.* vi. 4. 12), but he “explains” Christian terms in the same way, as well as a number of other words not found in classical historians (Averil Cameron 1970, 151–53).

49. See the illustrations collected in the exemplary index to L. Parmentier’s edition, *Theodoret Kirchengeschichte* (Leipzig 1911), 380 s.v. Ἕλληνες.

50. *Cod. Theod.* xvi. 10. 20; *Cod. Just.* i. 11. 8; *Cod. Theod.* xvi. 10. 21.

51. *Opt. Contra Don.* v. 7. 8 (ET M. Edwards, adapted).

52. *Ib.* iii. 11. 6–7, with Labrousse 1995, 98–100.

53. *Opt. Contra Don.* v. 7. 8 and 111. 11. 6–7.

call a pagan (*paganum vocas*)! A man who has already been baptized, not in our name or yours, but in the name of Christ, you call a pagan! . . . Anyone who has believed, has believed in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and you call him a pagan after his profession of faith! If any Christian (God forbid) should falter, he can be called a sinner, but he cannot become a pagan again.

The two most intriguing details here are what looks like the official formula “John Doe or Jane Doe, are you still a pagan,” and the assertion that even a bad Christian cannot become a pagan again once he has been baptized. There are also a number of neutral passages in various works of Augustine. For example, the following from one of the new sermons:⁵⁴

But perhaps you are not going to come across pagans of this sort [namely those who get drunk after festivals]. Some pagans condemn those who abandon themselves to disgusting pleasures and bouts of drunkenness, and say: “Just as you have bad Christians, so we have bad pagans. Consider what good pagans are like.” Then they name, for instance, wise men and philosophers.

Augustine styles Porphyry *nobilissimus philosophus paganorum*.⁵⁵ A law of 423 forbids “those persons who are truly Christians” to “lay violent hands on Jews and pagans (*paganis*) who are living quietly and attempting nothing disorderly or contrary to law.”⁵⁶

There can be little doubt that, in the absence of an existing term, *paganus* came to be treated as the Latin equivalent of “hellene.” But *why*? Why *paganus*? In 1952 Mohrmann suggested a modified version of the “civilian” hypothesis: *paganus* meaning not just civilian in opposition to soldier, but anyone not belonging to a particular group, an outsider.⁵⁷ She cited an impressive number of illustrations, and the list can be extended. A wide range of such meanings is provided by the following entry in a bilingual glossary: ιδιώτης (private citizen), ὁ μὴ ἄρχων (not in office), ἢ στρατευόμενος (not in the army): *privatus, paganus, plebeius*.⁵⁸ Every term is defined by what it is not rather than what it is. The most conspicuous feature of *paganus* is that, in all its meanings, it takes its precise color from an antonym. Originally rural as opposed to urban, then civilian as opposed to military, and finally pagan as opposed to Christian. We also find other such pairs. A passage of Cicero normally included under the first heading in fact implies a slightly different contrast: *pagani* as opposed to *montani*, an archaic formula apparently implying the entire population of Rome, both the original settlements on the Palatine and

54. S. Mayence 62. 97 = Dolbeau 1996, 373.

55. Aug. *Ep.* 234; *Civ. Dei* 22. 3.

56. *Cod. Theod.* xvi. 10. 24, issued at Constantinople on 8 June 423.

57. Mohrmann 1952, 118; for a more systematic treatment, *TLL* x. 1 (1982), 80. Courtney’s note suggests “outsider” as a translation of *paganum* at Juvenal 16. 33.

58. *Corp. Gloss. Lat* II. 330. 48; the absence of the religious sense is probably to be explained by eastern rather than pre-Christian origin.

Esquiline hills and the surrounding farm land, the *pagi*.⁵⁹ A couple of legal texts distinguish the estates of the emperor, senators, and *pagani*, where *pagani* apparently denotes ordinary private citizens.⁶⁰ A recently published document from Oxyrhynchus uses Greek *paganós* a number of times interchangeably with *demotai* “to describe those with no official positions.”⁶¹ In fact, we find Greek *paganós* in a variety of slightly differing contexts: private citizens as opposed to officials; lay clothes as opposed to monastic garb; everyday clothes as opposed to what one wears on festival days; a gladiator’s personal as opposed to professional name; and even everyday chariot racing as opposed to the special events held on gala days.⁶² By the tenth century there was even a verb *παγανῶ* = remove from office. The likelihood is that at least some of these meanings either go back to Latin *paganus* or would readily have been understood by Latin speakers from some (at least implied) antonym in the context. The soldier/civilian opposition is simply one example of a much wider and more general usage. It would not be surprising to find *pagani* in some newly found inscription relating to (say) membership of the Roman guilds (*collegia*), identifying those who were not members.

Here it is relevant to compare a formula employed by Greek-speaking Christians from as early as Paul: “those outside” (οἱ ἔξω, οἱ ἔξωθεν), meaning non-Christians. This too is a usage that goes back to pre-Christian times,⁶³ but became particularly common in Christian references to classical, that is to say non-Christian, culture: “external learning, wisdom, philosophy,” often used neutrally or even as a compliment.⁶⁴ It is not easy to see how best to express the idea of “outsider” in Latin. The lack of a definite article excluded the elegantly unspecific “those outside” possible in Greek. The standard Christian way to refer to classical literature or learning in Latin was to use the word *saecularis*,⁶⁵ literally “learning of the world,” but this was not an epithet that could be applied to a person. *Alienus*, *peregrinus* and *externus* were no doubt felt to be too hostile, implying as they did “foreign” or “non-Roman.” For a combination of reasons now irretrievably lost, *paganus* was the word that caught on.

Particularly suggestive is the earliest datable nonliterary example of the religious sense, an epitaph from Catania in Sicily for a baby girl, erected by her father Zoilus, *corrector* of the province.⁶⁶ Some critics have been reluctant to exploit an undated inscription, but it can at any rate be dated before 324, when the title of the governor of

59. Cicero, *De domo* 74, with R. G. Nisbet’s commentary (1939), 137–38; *TLL* x. 1. 79, § 2. α; Tarpin 2002, 186–88.

60. Ulpian, *Dig.* xi. 4. 3: *divus Marcus . . . facultatem dedit ingrediendi tam Caesaris quam senatorum et paganorum praedia*; so too *ib.* xi. 4. 1. 2.

61. P. Oxy. 3758 (quotation from R. A. Coles on line 9, p. 164).

62. Grégoire and Orgels 1952; Oikonomidès 1972, 290; Dagron 2000, 127. For gladiators, J. Keil, *Akad. Wiss. Wien, Anzeiger* 79 (1942), 84–87; L. Robert, *Bull. Ép.* 1943, 336.

63. See LSJ, Bauer/Danker and Lampe s.v. ἔξω and ἔξωθεν. Iamblichus, *Vita Pythag.* 252, uses οἱ ἔξω of those outside the circle of Pythagoras.

64. ἡ ἔξω (θεν) παιδεία, ἡ θύραθεν (φιλο) σοφία; many examples cited in Cameron and Long 1993, 35–37.

65. *saeculares litterae, libri, codices, eruditio saeculi, saeculi disciplina*: *TLL* s.v. *littera* Ilc2a and *litteratura*; on *saeculum* in the sense of what we would call the “secular” world, Löfstedt, *Syntactica* ii (Lund 1933), 470–72.

66. *CIL* x. 7122 = *ILCV* 1549; revised text by G. Manganaro in *AE* 1959, no. 23, with some useful notes.

Sicily was changed to *consularis*.⁶⁷ Since this makes it by a half-century the earliest-known example of the usage, we might hope to find some clue here about its origin. The girl, Julia Florentina, was *pagana nata*, lived for eighteen months and twenty-two days, and died *fidelis facta*, surviving her baptism by four hours. Ten days later she was buried in front of the church of the martyrs. A number of things about this touching dedication call for comment. First, in such a context there can be no question of any pejorative connotation. Second, even if Zoilus's own conversion postdated Julia's birth, he cannot have considered a child (his own daughter) of less than two an active pagan. *Pagana* here must mean simply that she was not yet a full member of the church, more specifically that she was unbaptized.⁶⁸ Third, *pagana nata* is clearly and sharply contrasted with *fidelis facta*. That is to say, as in the many other cases just considered, *pagana* takes its precise color from an antonym in the context.

Following Mohrmann, then, I would suggest that the religious sense has nothing to do with either rustics or soldiers of Christ. At some time, around the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century, Christians began referring to those "outside" their community as *pagani*. It is unlikely that there was ever a conscious search for a new term. *Paganus* was simply the most natural term for any Latin-speaking community to apply to outsiders. To use a contemporary idiom, *paganus* represented "the other" in any group or community, in this case (of course) the other in a now Christian world. We have seen that cultivated folk thought it a vulgarity or neologism. But more and more people found it a convenient, at least potentially neutral way of referring to non-Christians, and eventually even the educated capitulated and it became standard. It was presumably at this stage that fancy by-forms and derivatives like *paganismus*, *paganitas*, *paganista*, and *paganizo* were coined.⁶⁹

Take a recent case in English. Nobody really knows where gay = homosexual comes from. It is hard to believe that there can be any connection with old-fashioned phrases like "gay dog" or "gay Lothario," nor with the long-obsolete sense "prostitute" applied to women.⁷⁰ Scholars being scholars, one has even suggested a link with the use of "gai" in thirteenth- and fourteen-century Provençal poetry! According to Partridge, the sense has been "common" in the United States since ca. 1945.⁷¹ The second edition of the *OED* offers citations from the 1950s, but it did not become widespread till the 1960s or 1970s.

The most intriguing thing about the word is not its ultimate derivation, but the fact that it caught on so rapidly, effectively eliminating all competition. And the reason it did so is surely that by the 1970s homosexuality had sufficiently entered the social

67. Chastagnol 1963, 371–72; Barnes 1982, 165.

68. So Mohrmann 1952, 114.

69. For *paganitas* (quite common) and *paganista* or *paganita* (very rare), see *TLL* x. 1. 78. 42–49, 50–77.

70. See the well-documented entry s.v. in *OED*; Burchfield, *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* (1996), s.v.; Garner, *Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style* (2000) s. v.

71. Boswell 1980, 43 n. 6; Partridge, *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, 8th ed. (New York 1982), 450.

and cultural mainstream for a need to be felt for a neutral, nonspecific term, a term that neither depreciated homosexuals nor evoked uncomfortably explicit sexual associations (as “homosexual” itself does), a word that could be dropped casually in “polite” company. Words that fill a newly felt need sometimes catch on very quickly (computer-related terminology is an obvious recent illustration), and it is surely no coincidence that *paganus* caught on a generation after the Constantinian revolution.

2

Another point that may cause raised eyebrows in some quarters is my reluctance to use the currently fashionable “polytheist” in place of “pagan.” There seems to be a growing sense that “pagan” is somehow objectionable. Among academics, it is Fowden who has most firmly articulated the objections, urging that “it is inappropriate to use a term derived from Christian apologetic to denote a religious culture whose study is struggling to emerge from Christian stereotypes.”⁷² True to his convictions, he used “polytheist” and “polytheism” throughout his valuable survey of late antique paganism in *Cambridge Ancient History* 13 (somewhat undermined by the index to the volume, where the entry for “polytheism” offers “see paganism”!). But it is relevant to point out straightaway that his negative reading of the word is colored by his mistaken appeal to the pejorative “rustic” etymology. It may be precisely because it was *not*, in itself, an overtly pejorative term that *paganus* caught on when and as rapidly as it did.

More surprisingly, there are signs that the word is not only felt to be unfair to late antique non-Christians but also offensive to present-day non-Christians. Several schools invited to participate in a conference on “paganism and Christianity” in London a few years ago refused to attend. Apparently, school authorities thought the term might cause offense to their many Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish students. Barnes has described a lecture he gave on late Roman paganism that called forth more discussion about his terminology than his thesis, and I myself have had the same experience. In an age of growing religious fundamentalism I certainly have no wish to cause offense, but this is surely a case of misplaced political correctness.

To be sure, there is a danger that pejorative language will foster or disguise biased thinking. We might well doubt the impartiality of a modern historian who used terms like “heathen,” “infidel,” or “idolater.”⁷³ But whatever negative associations “pagan” may once have borne in Christian polemic are surely now confined to the rhetoric of American fundamentalist preachers. The Reverend Jerry Falwell infamously blamed indigenous “pagans and abortionists” rather than foreign terrorists for the 9/11 attacks

72. Fowden 1991, 119 n.*.

73. To judge from its *OED* entry, “heathen” regularly implies uncivilized and uncultivated. The very fact that it is now obsolete, at any rate in scholarly discourse, suggests that it has always been a more pejorative term than “pagan.”

on New York. But such excesses aside, the current associations of “pagan” outside the Academy are overwhelmingly positive rather than negative. Anyone who searches the Internet for “pagan” will discover in a matter of minutes that it is now a key concept in New Age philosophy, Wicca, environmental awareness, and many other alternatives to the supposed tyranny of traditional organized religion.⁷⁴ Modern pagans (or “neopagans,” as they sometimes call themselves) claim to practice an “earth-centred religion” that offers harmony with nature, ecological awareness, tolerance, and enhanced spirituality, and are delighted to derive their concerns from the original meaning of *paganus*, “country-dweller.”⁷⁵ I would be the first to concede that this idealized late twentieth-century “paganism” has no genuine historical roots. Yet it is as much part of the baggage with which a twenty-first-century reader approaches the word as the Christian polemic of earlier centuries and Jerry Falwell. Add that the dominant modern academic representation of late Roman paganism has been as a romantic resistance movement, and it is verging on the absurd to suggest that any modern reader is likely to be led into a negative bias by the use of this word in a book on the last pagans.

It is true enough that early Christians used “paganism” as “a convenient shorthand for [a] vast spectrum of cults ranging from the international to the ethnic and local.”⁷⁶ Athanassiadi and Frede write of “those who were grouped together as pagans by the Christian apologists, partly for reasons of convenience, partly for reasons of propaganda.”⁷⁷ But this is more than just a question of convenience or propaganda—or (as Fowden put it) “the lazy cunning of Christian apologists.”⁷⁸ There is a very real sense in which Christianity actually created paganism. The development has been described with exemplary clarity by North:⁷⁹

It is perhaps misleading even to say that there was such a religion as “paganism” at the beginning of our period. . . . It might be less confusing to say that the pagans, before their competition with Christianity, had no religion at all in the sense in which that word is normally used today. They had no tradition of discourse about ritual or religious matters (apart from philosophical debate or antiquarian treatise), no organized system of beliefs to which they were asked to commit themselves, no authority-structure peculiar to the religious area, above all no commitment to a particular group of people or set of ideas other than their family and political context. If this is the right view of pagan life, it

74. As of 8 October 2008, Google offered more than 34 million hits for “pagan,” excluding Wahhabi sites the great majority (as far as I persevered) favorable.

75. For a mass of current definitions of “pagan,” see www.religioustolerance.org/paganism.htm; see too Hardman and Harvey (eds.), *Paganism Today* (San Francisco 1995) and Pearson, Roberts, and Samuel (eds.), *Nature Religion Today: Paganism in the Modern World* (Edinburgh 1998), both with extensive bibliographies. Half the contributors to both these volumes are academics.

76. Fowden 1993, 38.

77. Athanassiadi and Frede 1999, 4–5.

78. Fowden 1988, 173–82.

79. North 1992, 187–88.

follows that we should look on paganism quite simply as a religion invented in the course of the second to third centuries AD, in competition and interaction with Christians, Jews and others.

The lumping together of all non-Christian cults (Judaism excepted) under one label is not just an illustration of Christian intolerance. As far as the now Christian authorities were concerned, whether at the local, church, or governmental level, those who refused to acknowledge the one true god, whatever the differences between them, were for all practical purposes indistinguishable. Thus the objection that the term “pagan” “flattens out the diversity of religious experience” of non-Christians, and suggests the Christian perspective of a world divided into two distinct categories⁸⁰ is misplaced. Of course it does. We should not think of fourth-century non-Christians indignantly protesting that they were all being lumped together under an insulting sobriquet. No more bias is involved than when (say) European, Mexican, or Japanese nationals domiciled in the United States are nowadays all classified indifferently as “aliens.” It would be absurd to object that the term does not do justice to their diversity. In the eyes of the U.S. government, whatever their ethnic or national origin, language or religion, they are indeed all aliens.

Fourth-century pagans naturally never referred to themselves as pagans, less because the term was insulting than because the category had no meaning for them. A pagan anxious to discover whether the person he was speaking to was a fellow pagan would get a more illuminating response by asking him whether he was a Christian! When the pagan Longinianus styles himself *homo paganus* in a letter to Augustine (*Ep.* 234), the tone of the letter suggests irony. He would certainly not have so styled himself writing to a fellow pagan.

No one planning to treat the non-Christian cults of late antiquity in and for themselves in all their variety and complexity will feel any need to use so unspecific a term as “pagan.” She will simply write about the followers of Mithras, Isis, Marnas, and so on. And anyone studying (as Fowden brilliantly did) the role of monotheism in creating a universal state might justifiably find “polytheism” a more appropriate term for contrasting the role of religion in the pre- and post-Constantinian empire. But anyone planning to treat the attitude of the Christian establishment to non-Christian groups will find “pagan” a simpler and more accurate term. There seems little point in writing of the government issuing laws against polytheism when the laws themselves use terms like “gentiles,” “*pagani*,” and a variety of insulting periphrases. Indeed, those who employ the supposedly neutral “polytheism” in such a context⁸¹ are in consequence (if unintentionally) making the Roman government appear less intolerant than it actually was.

Fowden also objected that the continued use of “pagan” and “paganism” by classical and Christian scholars is “one more sign of their isolation from other disciplines,

80. For example, Sandwell 2007, 10; so too Lee 2000, 10.

81. So Fowden in his chapter in *CAH* 13 (1998), 538–60.

particularly anthropology, where ‘polytheism’ is the norm.” If “polytheism” is indeed the term most modern anthropologists employ (and that is far from clear),⁸² this is not just because they perceive it as a modern, neutral alternative to “pagan.” In themselves, monotheism and polytheism certainly can be value-free ways of classifying religions, but that is because they are also virtually content-free. As the online *Encyclopaedia Britannica* puts it, polytheism “characterizes virtually all religions other than Judaism, Christianity and Islam.” Paganism has a much more restricted reference.

In modern academic writing “pagan” is both more and less than a synonym (pejorative or otherwise) for “polytheist.” Whatever its connotations in the preaching of televangelists or Wicca Web sites, in current historical discourse, by long-established convention it is regularly employed as a shorthand for various facets of the non- or pre-Christian society of the Graeco-Roman world and its neighbours, excluding (for historical reasons) Judaism. For example, modern scholarly discussions of the age at which Roman girls married regularly distinguish between the evidence for Christian and “pagan” marriages.⁸³ It is also widely believed (whether rightly or wrongly is immaterial in this context) that women played a more prominent role in early Christian communities than their “pagan” counterparts.⁸⁴ In neither case does “pagan” have any reference, depreciatory or otherwise, to the religious beliefs of these people. It simply identifies social practices current in the non- or pre-Christian Roman world. In much the same way it is also now used in Jewish studies to identify non-Jewish cities or non-Jewish objects, imagery, practices, and art in the Jewish cities of Palestine.⁸⁵ It is also the standard term employed for their former religious practices in modern studies on the conversion of the Celts, Slavs, Vikings, and so on.⁸⁶ Purists might object to the usage, but it is widely accepted and not easy to think of a more succinct or convenient alternative. One might as well object to the collective use of “barbarian” to denote all and any peoples beyond the Roman frontiers, obviously depreciatory and making no distinction between long-established empires like Sassanid Persia and tribal groups like Goths and Huns. The reason no one does object is that barbarians have no modern constituency.⁸⁷

Furthermore, for all its polysyllabic pretense to technicality, it would be naive to assume that “polytheism” itself is a term free of pejorative connotations. To start with, the relevant entries in Lampe’s *Patristic Lexicon*⁸⁸ reveal it as a standard term of early Christian polemic, often linked with or glossed as idolatry and atheism. The Jewish

82. A survey of the Anthropological Index Online for the past thirty years showed far more hits for “paganism” than “polytheism.”

83. Hopkins 1965, 319; Shaw 1987, 44 (glossing “pagan” as “early empire”).

84. For a recent evaluation of this assumption, see Castelli 1998, 227–57.

85. S. Schwartz 2001, Ch. 4; Friedheim 2006.

86. For example, Jones and Pennick 1995, 132–37; Fletcher 1997, 6, and passim (“Celtic, Scandinavian and Slavonic paganisms”).

87. I am speaking of general books; naturally, the experts (notably Goffart) object.

88. *Svν. πολυθεΐα, πολύθεος* and related terms (notably *πολυθεομανία*, madness of polytheism).

writer Philo refers in the most hostile of terms to polytheism as an evil that leads to atheism.⁸⁹ With the growth of the doctrine of the Trinity and veneration of saints, pagans soon began to turn the reproach back on Christians. Here is what John Chrysostom represents pagans saying already before the close of the fourth century: “Who is this Father? Who is this Son? Who is this Holy Ghost? How is it that you accuse *us* of polytheism when you have *three* gods?”⁹⁰ The Saracens said the same about the Crusaders, as have many others before and since, most conspicuously fundamentalist Muslims of modern Christians.

Even at the academic level, we can hardly claim to have altogether shaken off the condescending Eurocentric assumption that polytheism is a stage that mankind passes through on the way to monotheism. If it is true that polytheism has become the preferred term of modern anthropologists, that is because they have chosen to ignore all this baggage. But the fact that they intend it as no more than a mode of classification does not mean that all readers will accept it as such. To take an obvious example, Christians and Muslims tend to see Hinduism as a classic case of polytheism, but “all Hindus sometimes and some Hindus always insist that there is in reality only one God, of whom all the distinct gods and goddesses are but forms.”⁹¹ One man’s taxonomy is another man’s condescension.

No less important, polytheism inescapably implies a monotheist perspective. It would never have occurred to anyone in pre-Christian times to call himself a polytheist, and even as late as the fourth century, non-Christians in different parts of the empire would almost certainly have thought that classifying them according to whether they worshipped one or many gods blurred what they themselves would have considered far more significant differences. Cicero and Varro, for example, would have been surprised by the emphasis on the number of gods rather than the priestly colleges. Varro’s *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* comprised sixteen books, the first thirteen devoted to priesthods, shrines, festivals, and rituals, with only the last three coming to the gods.⁹² A large part of the reason paganism yielded comparatively easily and rapidly (at least in the West) is precisely that pagans in different parts of the empire had so little in common.

Outside the academic context, current use of the term “polytheism” implies an aggressively monotheist perspective, whether Christian or Muslim. In this postmodern age, when poly- words (polyvalent, polysemous, and the like) have come to take on aggressively positive connotations, some attack monotheism as “imperialism in religion.”⁹³ In the mouth of a Jerry Falwell or Osama bin Laden, polytheism is by no

89. *De confus. ling.* 42 (τῶ πολυθέῳ λεγομένῳ κακῶ); *De fuga* 114; *De praem.* 162; *De ebr.* 110; *De virt.* 214; *De decal.* 65; *De opif.* 171.

90. πῶς . . . ἡμῖν ἐκαλεῖ πολυθεῖαν; Jo. Chrys. *In Joann. Hom.* xvii. 4 (PG 49. 112).

91. Fuller 1992, 30.

92. For Varro’s sixteen books, below p. 615n.231; cf. Cic. *De nat. deor.* iii. 5 and *De harusp. resp.* 18 for a similar emphasis.

93. Adler 1986, viii.

means just a term of taxonomy. Anyone who searches the Internet for “polytheist” or “polytheism” will discover a large number of Wahhabi denunciations of Jews, Christians, and even Shiite Muslims as polytheists. One Web site refers to Christians as “polytheist trinitarian pagans.”⁹⁴ Whatever chances “polytheism” may once have had of becoming a scientific principle of classification have been overtaken by events. In the modern world, the sad truth is that very few terms in the religious lexicon are entirely neutral.

One much-debated issue in current research (Ch. 5) is the percentage of Christian officeholders at successive dates (350, 380, 420, and so on). Since the point of the exercise is to trace the rate of Christianization, for this limited purpose it is enough to classify all who cannot be shown to be Christians as pagans, whatever their actual beliefs (about which in most cases we have no information of any sort). From the point of view of our statistical inquiry all we need to know is, was he or wasn't he a Christian? If not, it doesn't soften the blow to classify him as polytheist rather than pagan. To take a somewhat different example, in standard usage “Visigothic paganism” and “Viking paganism” simply refer to whatever cults the Visigoths and Vikings practiced before they embraced Christianity.⁹⁵ It neither describes nor judges any actual beliefs they held before conversion; in itself it does not even entail the assumption that they were polytheists.

Paganism certainly *implies* polytheism, but not all pre-Christian cults were in fact polytheist. The truth is that from the earliest times down into late antiquity a great many pagans believed in the supremacy of one god or supreme power.⁹⁶ To be sure, most of them also assumed a plurality of subordinate gods, but is it helpful on this basis to classify them straightforwardly as polytheists? Fowden himself cites the well-known case of the grammarian Maximus of Madauros, writing to none other than his friend Augustine:⁹⁷

There is a Greek myth of uncertain authenticity that Mount Olympus is the dwelling-place of the gods. But we have the evidence of our eyes (*cernimus et probamus*) that the forum of our own town is occupied by a throng of beneficent deities (*salutarium numinum*). Yet who would be so foolish, so touched in the head, as to deny that there is one supreme god, without beginning, without natural offspring, like a great and powerful father? His powers, scattered throughout the material world, we call upon under various names, since (of course) none of us knows his true name. For “god” is a name common to all cults. Thus when we honour his separate parts by different forms of prayer, we seem to worship him entire.

94. www.answering-christianity.com; another site refers to Christians as “trinitos.”

95. Thompson 1966, vii, 55–63; Jones and Pennick 1995, 132–37.

96. Athanassiadi and Frede 1999; see too Barnes 2001, 142–62; North 2005, 125–43.

97. *Ep.* 16. 1 (Sr. W. Parsons's translation, adapted); for the little that is known about Maximus, *PCBE* i. 733–34.

Despite the fact that Maximus closes his letter with the wish that the “gods preserve” Augustine (a routine formula, in this case presumably intended as a joke), it surely misplaces the emphasis to classify him as polytheist.⁹⁸ In modern terminology he was a “henotheist,” someone who believes in one god, thought not to the exclusion of all others.⁹⁹ But this distinction would have been meaningless to fourth-century Christians, in whose eyes there was no difference between polytheists, henotheists, or indeed atheists. They were all pagans. Even monotheists would be pagans if their one god was not the one true god. For Christians, the key distinction was less between one god and many gods than between the one true god and false gods, whether one or many.¹⁰⁰

Athanassiadi and Frede raise the surprising objection that it is “hardly appropriate” to characterize “highly articulate thinkers like Plotinus or Proclus” as pagans. The irrelevance of such an argument is sufficiently exposed by asking whether “polytheist” would be more appropriate, or even more descriptive. Neither term (of course) is a remotely *adequate* characterisation of the religious beliefs of *anyone*, whether a subtle philosopher like Proclus or an illiterate devotee of Mithras in the Roman army. But whatever else Proclus was, in the eyes of the Christian authorities he was indeed a pagan. In this case the irrelevance of the argument is further underlined by the fact that their fellow Greeks, Christians and pagans alike, would have called Plotinus and Proclus not pagans but *hellenes*, a characterisation both would proudly have accepted.

There are in fact more substantial and relevant objections to the term “pagan.” The widespread use of formulas like “pagan reaction,” “pagan propaganda,” and even just “the pagans” in much earlier writing on the end of Graeco-Roman paganism has encouraged the mistaken idea that pagans *as a class* possessed unity of purpose and organization, at least in the face of the threat posed by Christianity. This is an assumption that has plagued a good deal of writing about late Roman paganism in particular. Since many of the last generation of Roman pagans came from the same social class, it has often been taken for granted that there was a “pagan party,” led by a few prominent aristocrats. We shall see that this was not so. But it is an error that would not be lessened by using the term “polytheist” rather than “pagan.”¹⁰¹ Nor is the danger of seeing the decline of paganism too much in terms of Christian/pagan conflict in any way lessened by a change of terminology.

Much confusion has also been caused by loose use of phrases like “pagan literature” or “the pagan classics.” To characterize the classics in this way has given rise to the misleading notion that pagans saw the classics as a buffer or even weapon against Christianity. We shall see that there is little reason to believe that pagans as a class were

98. Another famous example is Lucius’s prayer to Isis under her many different guises in Bk xi of the *Metamorphoses*.

99. So Fowden 1993, 5, 40–41.

100. For the distinction between true and false religion, Jan Assmann, *The Price of Polytheism* (Stanford 2010).

101. Fowden, for example, refers to “the polytheist party in the senate” (*CAH* xiii [1998], 551).

any more devoted to the classics than cultivated Christians (Ch. 9–13). “Pagan” historiography (Ch. 14, 17–18) is a particularly dangerous notion, unmistakably implying writers with a consciously pagan agenda. There are one or two Greek anti-Christian histories (Eunapius, Zosimus), but no identifiable western, Latin example. Yet “polytheist” classics or historiography is no solution; rather terms with no specifically religious associations like “classical,” “classicizing,” or “secular.” It is no less misleading to write of “pagan” art. While it may be a convenient and acceptable shorthand to distinguish (say) pagan from Christian sarcophagi, meaning those decorated with mythological scenes as opposed to those decorated with biblical scenes, to assume or argue that the former have a “pagan” message (see Ch. 19) implies a (so to speak) non-denominational polytheist iconography that all non-Christians would recognize as such, whatever their individual beliefs. It also implies (indeed is often intended to imply) a consciously anti-Christian purpose. Obviously “polytheist” does not help here either. Once again, “classical,” “secular,” or just “mythological” is the simplest solution at a terminological level.

A random survey of a few recent studies of late antique society that employ “polytheist” instead of “pagan” turned up not a single case where the substitution of “pagan” could by any stretch of the imagination have been said to convey a negative bias of any sort. I like to think that in the following pages I use “pagan” less often and more carefully than most who have written on this subject. And where appropriate I occasionally use “polytheist.” But in most cases “pagan” is the simplest, most familiar, and most appropriate term, and I make no further apology for using it.

FROM CONSTANTIUS TO THEODOSIUS

During his visit to Rome in 357, Constantius II ordered the altar of Victory removed from the senate house. Christian senators had understandably been distressed at having to watch while their pagan peers burned incense before senatorial meetings. Yet during that same visit Constantius walked around Rome admiring the ancient temples, and even filled vacancies in the pontifical colleges, evidently in his capacity as *pontifex maximus*.¹ The pious emperor may not have performed these duties enthusiastically, but no doubt saw them as a necessary *quid pro quo*. If he was going to grant a request from Christian senators, it was tactful to grant a parallel request from pagan senators. Though usually treated as a turning point in Christian intolerance, when viewed in context what this episode really illustrates is the policy of compromise even the most seemingly intolerant of Christian emperors pursued whenever possible.

Many Christians undoubtedly urged Constantius to go much further. Firmicus Maternus is one vivid and notably intemperate surviving illustration (Ch. 5. 1). But emperors were reluctant to offend the rich and powerful. Churchmen might put spiritual values first, but emperors faced more pressing priorities. The reason Constantius was in the West at all was a civil war, and while a few prominent Roman aristocrats had rallied to Magnentius (notably Proculus, prefect of Rome under Magnentius in 351–52), many others had left Rome to join Constantius (notably Adelphius, prefect of Rome from June to December 351). As it happens, Proculus was a pagan and Adelphius a Christian, but there is no evidence that allegiance during the war turned on religious sympathy. Even if it had, that was still an argument for conciliating powerful pagans as far as could be done without offending Christian opinion. It was no doubt explained to Constantius that Roman priesthoods were social prizes rather than religious vocations (Ch. 4), and that the pontiffs and augurs themselves never touched a knife or a sacrificial victim.

The altar of Victory was back in the senate house by 382, no doubt the result of an appeal to Julian on Constantius's death. Inevitably, Christian senators are bound to have renewed their demand for its removal on Julian's death. Some have argued that

1. Amm. xvi. 10. 4–12; Symm. *Rel.* 3. 7; Rüpke 2008, 58, implausibly claims that this “had nothing to do with the role of *pontifex maximus*, but must be seen in respect of the emperor's participation in senatorial appointments.”

Julian's anti-Christian policies had a polarizing effect on Christian/pagan relations.² There may be some truth in this, but they certainly had no immediate or perceptible effect on imperial policy. The dates simply do not fit. Since the altar was clearly still there in 382, it follows that (passing over the short reign of Jovian) Valentinian I (363–75) must have turned down the appeal of the Christian party. This is put beyond doubt by the speech Ambrose put in the mouth of the (safely deceased) Valentinian I addressing his son Valentinian II, beginning: "You have misjudged me in thinking that I collaborated with the pagans. Nobody told me that there was an altar in that Roman senate house. . . ."³ This can hardly be true. Symmachus represents Valentinian looking down from heaven on (pagan) priests tearfully reproaching him "now that the custom which *he himself was glad to preserve* has been broken."⁴ Valentinian famously did his best to be neutral in matters of religion,⁵ and there can be little doubt that he decided to concede this point to powerful pagans.

It is natural to assume that Christian senators renewed their appeal to Gratian when he became senior western Augustus on the death of Valentinian in 375. But to start with he too must have refused, since it was not till 382 that he ordered the altar removed again. This refusal was presumably one element in the conciliatory policy toward the Roman aristocracy he pursued in the early years of his reign. In 382 he also took certain financial measures against the state cults, and most scholars have assumed that it was in connection with these two measures that he also repudiated the title of *pontifex maximus*. What we would like to know is *why* he embarked on what has traditionally been seen as a radical new policy toward paganism.⁶

The standard view is that in the first part of his reign Gratian was still under the influence of his old tutor Ausonius, held to explain the pro-senatorial policies of his early years. But after moving his court to Milan in 381 he fell under the influence of bishop Ambrose and abruptly turned against the pagan aristocrats he had previously been courting. Though often repeated as though undisputed fact, neither part of this hypothesis rests on any sort of evidence. The fact that Ausonius was on friendly terms with Symmachus does not prove that he was behind Gratian's early policy of courting the Roman senate. That policy was an inevitable reaction to the very hostile attitude to the aristocracy of Valentinian I's later years. Within months of Valentinian's death those responsible for this policy were either dismissed or executed.⁷ Given the ever-present danger of usurpation, there had never been any point in treating so powerful a group so badly, and it is unlikely that the paganism of some of the most prominent senators was a factor in the new policy. Ausonius himself was undoubtedly a Christian,

2. Drake 2000, 436; Stark 2006, 196.

3. Ambrose, *Ep.* 72. 16 (= Maur. 17). References to Ambrose's letters are to Zelzer 1982.

4. *se culpatum putat more violato quem libenter ipse servavit*, *Rel.* 3. 20; cf. 3. 3.

5. *inter religionum diversitates medius stetit, nec quemquam inquietavit, neque ut hoc coleretur imperavit aut illud*, *Amm. Marc.* xxx. 9. 5. For more detail on Valentinian's religious policy, Lenski 2002, Ch. 5.

6. For this approach see Bowersock 1986, 298–307 at 303.

7. Matthews 1975, 64–69.

and the fact that, like many Christians of his generation, he was devoted to classical culture need not imply any sympathy for pagan cult. Nor was Ausonius's the only voice Gratian listened to. According to Zosimus, in the early days of his sole reign Gratian was under the influence of court eunuchs (p. 752). There is no evidence of any kind that Gratian was ever favorable to paganism as distinct from being attracted to secular culture.

On the other side, there is no real evidence for the all but universal assumption that Gratian ever fell under the influence of Ambrose. In autumn 378 he asked Ambrose for a statement of faith.⁸ In the past this was interpreted as a request from a pious but (thanks to Ausonius) theologically untutored youth in search of spiritual guidance from a bishop known to be impeccably orthodox.⁹ It was further assumed that Gratian at once succumbed to Ambrose's spell. But at this date Ambrose had not yet published any theological writings, and if it was instruction the emperor was looking for, there were many more senior and experienced bishops he knew better much closer to his court in Trier. Most of these bishops were Homoeans, naturally suspicious of the new Catholic bishop of Milan who had replaced the loyal Homoean Auxentius. It is much more likely that these Homoeans were suspicious of Ambrose and urged Gratian to demand a personal statement of faith. Ambrose's exact words are *fidem meam audire voluisti*, where the *meam* implies, not a theological treatise, but Ambrose's personal creed. Coming from an emperor, the *voluisti* is something closer to a command than a wish (indeed Ambrose later uses the term *mandaveras* of Gratian's request).¹⁰ Ambrose rapidly fulfilled the request with *De fide* i–ii, to which he subsequently added three more books. Bk iii begins by claiming that “certain malicious minds, bent on sowing disputes, have provoked me to write at greater length.” The natural implication is that Gratian had shown Bks i–ii to the bishops who had requested the statement for their approval. Not only did the emperor not fall under Ambrose's spell, Ambrose's polemical statement of faith was found wanting by his experts.¹¹ Furthermore, a year or so later Gratian agreed to “restore” a church in Milan to the Homoeans, apparently in response to a group of Milanese Homoeans and plainly without the courtesy of consulting Ambrose first.¹² It was presumably in response to this that Ambrose took the extraordinary step of refusing to meet with Gratian during his visits to Milan in 379 and 380.¹³ It is hard to resist the inference that relations between Ambrose and Gratian were often strained.

As for the removal of the altar of Victory and the withdrawal of the subsidies, Ambrose himself explicitly disclaims any responsibility, and while (as we shall see) he

8. Nautin 1974, 229–44; McLynn 1994, 98–106; Barnes 1999, 165–74.

9. Conspicuously so the translation by H. de Romestin in the Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers series (1885).

10. For examples, Vidén 1984, 82, 88; Ambr. *De fide* i, pr.; iii. 1. 1.

11. See McLynn 1994, 112–18 for a full discussion.

12. McLynn 1994, 121–23.

13. So Barnes 1999, 171–73.

seriously misrepresents his past conduct on more than one occasion, there is no reason to question his veracity in this case. When recalling in 394 his role in dissuading Valentinian II from restoring the altar and subsidies in 384, Ambrose adds that he “was not responsible for their removal, but was responsible for preventing their restoration.”¹⁴ Why would he take pride in the one but repudiate any part in the other if he had been equally active in both?

The two celebrated letters to Valentinian II about the altar and subsidies have placed Ambrose so squarely in the center of the “debate” about the altar and subsidies that it is seldom appreciated that they were unsolicited by and almost certainly unwelcome to their recipient. It is instructive to note that when Ambrose came to write his funerary oration on Valentinian, he was tactful enough to suppress entirely his intervention. Instead we hear how¹⁵

when all who were in attendance in the consistory, Christians and pagans alike, were saying that [subsidies and altar] should be restored, he alone, like Daniel, the spirit of God being stirred within him, denounced the faithlessness of the Christians, and opposed the pagans saying: “How can you think that I should restore what my pious brother [Gratian] has taken away?” For this would wrong both his religion and his brother, by whom he refused to be surpassed in piety.

This is certainly how Valentinian would have liked his Christian subjects to view his decision, but Ambrose’s intervention made that impossible. If the young emperor had been intending to say no all along, he could not have claimed to be the lone voice of faith surrounded by waverers. If, on the other hand, he was thinking of the sort of compromise his father might have chosen (removing the altar but restoring the subsidies), that route too was made impossible by Ambrose.

More relevant in the present context, for all that Ambrose later claimed to have enjoyed close and affectionate relations with Valentinian, it is nonetheless clear from these two letters that he was not consulted about the senatorial embassy of 384. He heard about it through the grapevine, and wrote requesting a copy of Symmachus’s petition. When he had read it he wrote a detailed refutation. The very fact that he was obliged to write is enough to prove that he was not consulted in advance and was not present either for the embassy or during the discussion of the petition. The second letter, certainly and possibly the first as well, was written after the decision had already been made, perhaps without any input from Ambrose at all. The notion that, because he lived in the same city as the emperor, Ambrose was a frequent visitor at court and so in a position to exert informal influence, is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of late Roman courts. Personal access to the emperor was strictly controlled by the *magister officiorum* (p. 202) and court eunuchs, a group with whom Ambrose had

14. *Ep. extra coll.* 10. 2 (= 57 Maur.), with *decerno* presumably used in the sense “vote in approval.”

15. *De ob. Val.* 19 (trans. Liebeschuetz, adapted).

especially bad relations. If Ausonius exercised a strong influence over his former pupil, that was because he himself held office at court from 375–79, and was expected to offer advice. There is no evidence that Ambrose was a frequent (or welcome) visitor at the courts of either Gratian or Valentinian II.

On the basis of his speech about the altar of Victory, Symmachus has come to be regarded as an uncompromising champion of the pagan cause and a bitter opponent of Christianity. Symmachus himself would have been surprised by such a reputation. In the first place, it was surely for his oratorical ability and extensive experience as an envoy rather than for his religious commitment or expertise that he was chosen as senatorial spokesman. He begins by telling his imperial addressee that he is playing a double role: “as your prefect I am transacting public business and as an envoy I am presenting the message of my fellow-citizens.” Both his father and father-in-law had served with distinction as senatorial ambassadors at court,¹⁶ and Symmachus himself first did so at the court of Valentinian I at Trier in 369–70 when not yet thirty, as he was to again and again in later life.¹⁷

It is important to bear in mind that more than eloquence was required. An envoy who felt he had misjudged the tone of his formal speech might repair the damage at the emperor’s table or in private lobbying at court. Until a brilliant paper by John Matthews, modern readers were content to mock the elegant emptiness of Symmachus’s letters. Matthews showed that it was one of the prime functions of this “idiom” (as he rightly called it) “to function across the boundaries of religious difference (just as it also crossed the racial boundaries presented by the barbarian generals at court).”¹⁸ Fellow pagans identified Symmachus as the man for the job precisely because, though a staunch pagan, he was known to be a moderate, with as many Christian connections at court as anyone in public life. It must have been obvious to even the most intransigent pagans that tact rather than confrontation was called for if there was to be any chance of recovering the subsidies withdrawn by Gratian. The speech itself bears out this perspective. For all its eloquence (not to be equated with passion), this celebrated speech asks for no more than toleration of the state cults: “there must be more than one way to such a secret.” It is clear that Symmachus was willing to settle for compromise and coexistence.

There is no reason to believe that he was involved in more than the first two of the (at least) six embassies that passed between senate and court on this issue. In 384 he took advantage of his position as prefect of Rome (the official intermediary between senate and emperor)¹⁹ to renew the 382 appeal in the form of a *relatio*, one of the forty-

16. L. Aurelius Avianius Symmachus, *praefectus urbi Romae* (PVR) 364–65: *multis legationibus pro amplissimi ordinis desiderii apud divos principes functo* (ILS 1257); Memmius Vitrasius Orfitus PVR 353–56, 357–59: *legatus secundo [= twice] difficillimis temporibus petito senatus et populi Roman* (CIL vi. 1739, 1740, 1741 [= ILS 1243], 1742).

17. On his many senatorial embassies, Matthews 1974, 75–77; Sogno 2006.

18. Matthews 1974; Salzman 2006, 352–67.

19. Chastagnol 1960, 66–68.

nine formal “reports” he sent to court in the course of his seven months in office. That year saw Praetextatus as praetorian prefect of Italy and Symmachus as prefect of Rome. Some have hypothesized the beginning of a pagan offensive, provoked by Gratian’s measures. It is true that Praetextatus obtained an edict from court ordering the restoration of objects looted from temples, which Symmachus attempted to carry out, provoking accusations that he had arrested and tortured Christians (accusations that were conceded to be false by no less an authority than Pope Damasus).²⁰

But they could not have taken these initiatives without their respective prefectures, to which they had been appointed by the emperor. Why did Valentinian II appoint two such prominent pagans to positions that allowed them to do this? More specifically, why did he authorize Praetextatus to restore looted objects to pagan temples?²¹ The obvious explanation is that, well aware how upset a small number of powerful pagan nobles had been by Gratian’s measures, he did his best to conciliate them in other ways, most strikingly in the exceptional honor accorded Praetextatus of designation to the ordinary consulship for 385. If he could not allow them public funds for the cults, he could at least allow them to protect the fabric of their temples. We have already seen that Constantius pursued a similar policy when he removed the altar in 357, and we shall soon see that in 389 Theodosius too felt obliged to conciliate the pagan nobility after turning down yet another embassy about the altar and subsidies.

The policy of clerics like Ambrose on such issues was very simple: no compromise. But for an emperor, bombarded with contradictory petitions and protests from all sides, compromise was the name of the game. It is a serious oversimplification to imagine that any fourth-century Christian emperor pursued a single, consistent policy toward pagans or paganism. Valentinian II must have known that many Christians would be distressed to see Praetextatus and Symmachus holding high office and restoring statues to temples. But the more political among them would recognize the trade-off for what it was. The restoration of a few statues was little enough compared with the loss of public subsidies for the cults. Nor were most aristocrats prepared to give up more than a few months of their precious *otium* to public office. Symmachus’s prefecture, predictably enough, lasted barely seven months. When Praetextatus died later in 384 Symmachus was disheartened, and early in 385 resigned his prefecture, in effect abandoning his role as pagan activist. A decade later he was careful to keep his distance from the regime of the usurper Eugenius.

The third *relatio* has always been taken to represent Symmachus’s own most deeply held convictions. But he was not speaking straightforwardly on his own behalf. While the formulation and the eloquence are his, it is likely that some details (especially the more philosophical arguments) were contributed by those who chose him as their representative. Nothing in his correspondence suggests that this was an issue he felt

20. *Symm. Rel.* 21, with Chastagnol 1960. 161–62; and Vera 1981, 153–60.

21. Since Valentinian himself was only thirteen in 384, the suggestion presumably came from advisers, unfortunately unidentifiable but unlikely to be pagans.

passionately about. As already remarked, his letters never mention embassies, subsidies, or even the altar of Victory. Precisely because they tell us so little about the supposed pagan reaction, it was once assumed that the published version of Symmachus's letters was carefully edited.²² Certainly anything politically compromising would have been removed,²³ but his actions in 382 were common knowledge and his speech of 384 widely read and admired. Surviving letters to his older pagan friends and kinsmen refer so openly to pagan festivals and even to the meetings of the priestly colleges²⁴ that it is difficult to think of any reason why such lobbying should have been edited out.

Second, while the celebrated *relatio* is obviously the source of Symmachus's reputation as a pagan champion, it is less the speech than the detailed refutations by Ambrose and Prudentius that have given him this reputation. The speech itself is a remarkably moderate document, notable for its tact and reticence. Why did pagans decide to renew their plea only two years after Gratian rejected it in 384? Obviously because Gratian had been overthrown in a coup and killed. Many (and not only pagans) must have felt that this was a consequence of the new policy. Symmachus is careful to avoid even hinting at that possibility, but he does begin and end with Gratian, not indeed mentioning his death, but claiming instead that unscrupulous courtiers had failed to inform the young emperor about the embassy in 382, which was denied audience (p. 202). He then "reminds" Valentinian II that his father, Valentinian I, had not removed the altar. If Valentinian II had been disposed (as he might well have been) to grant the senatorial request, he could have accepted that Gratian was deceived by overzealous courtiers and reinstated his father's policy.

1: THE ALTAR OF VICTORY AND THE LOSS OF PUBLIC SUBSIDIES

If we may set aside the supposed influence of Ambrose, why did Gratian change his policy toward Roman paganism? Should we in fact be seeing a deliberate and radical new policy here at all? It is the apparent combination of the removal of altar, withdrawal of subsidies, and repudiation of the title of *pontifex maximus* that has given rise to this assumption. According to Chastagnol, it was during a visit to Rome in 376 that Pope Damasus warned Gratian about the dangers of Roman paganism, and that Maecius Gracchus, prefect of Rome in 376–77, was already reflecting this new policy when he ostentatiously destroyed a Roman Mithraeum before accepting baptism.²⁵

22. Against this assumption, McGeachy 1949, 222–29.

23. For example, all dealings with the usurper Maximus. Symmachus had been more careful with Eugenius, but even so he would have destroyed anything vulnerable to hostile interpretation.

24. E.g., *Epp.* i. 46, 47, 49, 51; ii. 34, 36, 53, 59; v. 85.

25. Chastagnol 1997, 40–41.

To take the last point first, there is no evidence that Gratian ever even visited Rome,²⁶ much less met Pope Damasus, and certainly no basis for assuming that Gracchus was following any sort of official policy. As for the altar of Victory, we have seen that its removal was an issue that had been raised again and again since 357. In all probability the initiative did not come from either Gratian himself or his immediate advisers. The natural assumption is that, when he moved his court to Milan in 380, Christian senators decided to renew their request to have the altar removed, just as pagan senators subsequently renewed their request to have it replaced when first Valentinian II and then Eugenius ascended the throne, approaching both a second time when they too moved their courts to Milan. Their spokesman may have been Anicius Auchenius Bassus, prefect of Rome in 382 and a Christian. Of course, we would like to know why Gratian eventually granted a request his father and perhaps he himself had earlier refused, but the answer may in part be no more than his general policy of courting the Roman senate, now increasingly Christian, and in part the increasing influence of powerful Roman Christians, now with easier access to a court in Milan.

Unsurprisingly, the altar of Victory affair has been endlessly discussed down the years. We have not only the plea for the restoration of altar and subsidies by Symmachus in his official capacity as prefect of Rome but also a point-by-point rebuttal by so well placed a contemporary as Ambrose, bishop of Milan. That is to say, we have a direct confrontation between the leading pagan and the leading Christian of the age. For many moderns, this is *the* conflict between paganism and Christianity. Yet no other ancient source so much as mentions it—not even Augustine, present in Rome at the time. Outside pagan senatorial circles the affair may not have been such a big deal as we tend to assume.

It is often described as a “debate,” a debate that, if the two texts are considered in this light, Ambrose clearly wins. It is important to be clear at the outset that this is a misleading perspective. Ambrose makes a number of neat points at Symmachus’s expense, but if Symmachus ever saw Ambrose’s letters, he certainly never responded. Inevitably, therefore, Ambrose had the last word. There is no evidence that Symmachus himself even published his *relatio*, which has come down to us in two forms: in a much later, posthumous edition of his *relationes*; and disadvantageously sandwiched between Ambrose’s two responses in Bk 10 of Ambrose’s published correspondence.

Ambrose certainly scores some points. (1) Where Symmachus straightforwardly appeals to the importance of tradition, Ambrose points out that the Roman state had in fact continually modified its religious practices, adding new gods from conquered peoples. Seen in this perspective the eventual adoption of Christianity can be represented as in line with the best Roman traditions. But if this had been a real debate, Symmachus would undoubtedly have responded that, while Roman pagans had no objection to Christianity being *added* to the Roman cults, it was another matter entirely for a new cult to *replace* all the old cults. That was *not* the Roman way. (2) Why should

26. Barnes 1999, 168.

the state pay for the maintenance of pagan cults when it did not even maintain the Christian church? Once again, the argument is disingenuous. While not formally maintaining the church, Christian emperors had poured favors and money in its direction. (3) Ambrose claims that it was not the pagan gods but Rome's armies that had won all those wars down the centuries. Another good point, until we remember that elsewhere Ambrose himself insists that the Christian emperors of his own day won their battles, not by force of arms, but simply by their piety, in effect a Christian restatement of Symmachus's argument (Ch. 3). (4) Then there is the low number of Vestals. According to Ambrose, it was only with difficulty that they could recruit seven,²⁷ nor did they have to remain virgins for life. And even so they had to be paid! This is a particularly cheap jibe. Obviously this was not the total number of chaste pagan women.²⁸

But before considering the arguments of the protagonists any further, it is essential to establish what exactly Gratian did in addition to having the altar removed. Since Symmachus claims that, despite removing the altar, Constantius "did not refuse funds (*impensas*) for the Roman rituals,"²⁹ it has generally (and surely rightly) been inferred that Gratian *did*, in some way or other, "refuse" funds. After all, the very same sentence claims that Constantius "stripped away nothing from the privileges of the Vestal Virgins," and it is clear from Symmachus that Gratian did indeed strip away the privileges of the Vestals. The state cults were not financed directly from public funds, but (as in most parts of the Graeco-Roman world) from the income of estates willed to the temples over the course of the centuries.³⁰ The standard assumption, based on several passages of Ambrose, is that Gratian confiscated these temple estates, which had the status of public property.

But Lizzi has recently pointed out that Symmachus himself does not mention temple estates, concentrating instead on the privileges of the Vestals, especially their right to receive legacies.³¹ Ambrose's letters, she argues, "were rhetorical pieces where the bishop selected what it seemed more convenient to say or not," while Symmachus's *relatio* "was an official document... with the sole purpose of obtaining the re-establishment of those pagan privileges Gratian's measures had suppressed." On this basis she privileges the evidence of Symmachus and suggests that only the Vestals were affected. Indeed, she goes on to argue that Gratian's measures, "far from proving that official paganism was dying, appear on the contrary as testimony to an attempt to check the economic effects which excessive devotion to the cult of Vesta was still producing in terms of legacies and donations of large landed estates." On this view, official Roman paganism was still thriving in 382. Not only did Gratian not remove its

27. In earlier times there were six (Wissowa 1912, 504 n. 5), but *Expositio Totius Mundi* 55, probably written soon after Constantius's Roman visit of 357 and well informed about Rome, also offers seven (see J. Rouge's edition [Paris 1966], 16). Ambrose is careful to use the ritual term *capere* of "taking" Vestals, and it would have weakened his point if he had got the number wrong.

28. Ambrose had already contrasted Christian and Vestal virgins in his earlier *De virginibus*; see Lizzi 1998.

29. *Romanis caerimoniis non negavit impensas*, *Rel.* 3. 7.

30. Bodei Giglioli 1977, 33–76; Liebenam 1900, 68–73, 340–46.

31. *Sym. rel.* 3. 11, 13, 14, 15; Lizzi 2007, 251–62.

financial basis; he did no more than take steps to prevent the Vestals' resources actually increasing in the future.

But there are problems with this interpretation. The series of senatorial embassies to court (at least six between 382 and 394) strongly suggests that pagans found Gratian's measures very damaging indeed to the finances of the cults. And the distinction Lizzi draws between Ambrose's "rhetorical pieces" and Symmachus's "official document" is misleading. Symmachus was no less a rhetorician than Ambrose. He, too, carefully selected which topics to dwell on and which to skate over. It is unwise to base any argument on what Symmachus does *not* say. Concerned contemporaries on both sides knew exactly what the measures were, and who and what was affected. Neither Ambrose nor Symmachus had to address every detail.

Much has been written on the importance of the cult of Victory to the last pagans, but it was surely for rhetorical and psychological reasons that Symmachus devoted his best efforts to Victory, in the hope that Christians at court would be impressed by the link he drew between recent military defeats and the removal of her altar. In the aftermath of the catastrophic defeat of Adrianople, this was the argument most likely to hit home with Christians as well as pagans. As for the actual altar, Symmachus loyally represents it as the place where senators swore allegiance to the emperor, glossing over its far more obvious and significant role as a locus of pagan cult offerings, vividly evoked by Ambrose (two separate descriptions of Christian senators with eyes streaming from the smoke and choking on cinders).³²

The withdrawal of the Vestals' privileges was less a frontal attack on paganism than an attempt to transfer their no-doubt extensive financial resources to the state. Symmachus contrives to make it seem petty and vindictive by claiming that their emoluments were now being used to pay dock workers,³³ protesting that even freedmen were allowed to receive legacies (*Rel.* 3. 14–15). Unlike all the other *publici sacerdotes*, Vestals were entirely supported by state funds. From the rhetorical point of view, it was surely because they were potential objects of sympathy that he devoted so much space to spinster ladies abruptly turfed out of their modest apartments.³⁴

Nine out of the twenty sections of Symmachus's plea are concerned with financial issues, a point gleefully exploited by Ambrose, who refers at least a dozen times to what he represents as the pagan obsession with money. Sometimes in general terms ("we glory in [the] blood [of martyrs], they worry about cash"),³⁵ but no fewer than

32. Ambrose, *Ep.* 72. 9 (= Maur. 170 and 73. 31 [= Maur. 18]).

33. Still a popular tactic in political rhetoric (taxes spent on nuclear weapons rather than school lunches...).

34. "If the privileges of his own college had also been removed, [Symmachus] would not have hesitated to say so clearly" (Lizzi 260). But the *pontifices*, secure in their estates, were not dependent on public support.

35. *nos sanguine gloriamur, illos dispendium movet* (*Ep.* 73. 11); *de dispendiis queruntur* (*Ep.* 72. 4); *virginitas quae pretio emitur* (73. 12).

eight times he represents the pagans as asking for “the cost of sacrifice,”³⁶ once even claiming that “their rituals cannot survive without money.”³⁷ We cannot dismiss so consistent a refrain as “rhetoric.” That the financial losses even Symmachus acknowledges included the confiscation of estates receives confirmation from a rescript of Honorius sent to Carthage in August 415, commanding that³⁸

in accordance with the constitution of the sainted Gratian . . . all land assigned by the false doctrine of the ancients to their sacred rituals shall be joined to the property of our privy purse. Thus, from the time when public expenditure on the worst superstition was forbidden, the revenues shall be exacted from the unlawful possessors thereof. . . . We decree that this regulation shall be observed not only throughout Africa, but throughout all regions situated in our world.

Lizzi insists that this law has nothing to do with the decree of Gratian as she reconstructs it from Symmachus. But it fits perfectly Ambrose’s remark that “no one has deprived the temples of votive offerings (*donaria*) or the *haruspices* of legacies; *only estates were confiscated*, and this because they [the pagans] did not use in a manner worthy of religion what they defended by right of religion.”³⁹ The first clause responds to Symmachus’s complaint about the ban on legacies to Vestals, listing two options apparently not affected by Gratian’s measures: votive offerings to temples and legacies to *haruspices*. Such precise claims would be counterproductive if not true. Here at least we must privilege the evidence of Ambrose. Clearly, estates that Christians saw as underwriting pagan cults were confiscated by Gratian. A law addressed to the proconsul of Africa in 408 reiterates an earlier ban that “withdrew revenues from the temples,” this time assigning them to the army.⁴⁰ What can this be but the decree of Gratian to which Symmachus and Ambrose refer?

Were temple estates still available as late as 382? Ambrose claims that it was “now many years since the rights of the temples (*iura templorum*) were abolished all over the world,”⁴¹ which might seem to imply that the rights of Roman temples had also long since been abolished. Yet the point of that “all over the world” might be that,

36. *ad usus quoque sacrificiorum profanorum praebere sumptum* (Ep. 72. 3); *sumptum sacrificiis profanis dari* (ib. 9); *de superstitionis impensis* (ib. 10); *sumptus sacrificiorum* (Ep. extra coll. 10. 2); *ad usus quoque sacrificiorum profanorum praebere sumptum* (Ep. 72. 3); *sumptus sacrificiis profanis dari* (ib. 9); *de superstitionis impensis* (ib. 10); *sumptus sacrificiorum* (Ep. extra coll. 10. 2 = Maur. 57).

37. *illi caerimonias suas sine quaestu manere posse non credunt* (Ep. 73. 11).

38. *omnia enim loca quae sacris error veterum deputavit, secundum divi Gratiani constituta nostrae rei iubemus sociari, it ut ex eo tempore quo inhibitus est publicus sumptus superstitioni deterrimae exhiberi, fructus ab incubatoribus exigantur* (Cod. Theod. xvi. 10. 20. 1).

39. *Nemo tamen donaria delubris . . . denegavit; sola sublata sunt praedia, quia non religiose utebantur his quae religionis iure defenderent*, Ambr. Ep. 73. 16.

40. *templorum detrahantur annonae*, Cod. Theod. xvi. 10. 19; the fuller version in Sirm. 12 (line 22) reveals that this is a reiteration of an earlier ban, addressed to the PPO of Italy but forwarded by him to the proconsul of Africa.

41. *certe ante plurimos annos templorum iura toto orbe sublata sunt*, Ambrose, Ep. 73. 19.

since these rights had been abolished everywhere else, it was now high time that Roman temple estates were abolished *as well*. That this is the preferable interpretation would seem to be borne out by a passage in his later speech (392) on the death of Valentinian II:

Rome had sent envoys in order to recover the rights of the temples (*propter recuperanda templorum iura*), the unholy prerogatives (*privilegia*) of their priesthoods,⁴² the performance of their sacred rites.... And when [Valentinian II] was confronted with the precedent of his father [Valentinian I], that during his reign no one had taken them (*ea*, = *templorum iura* etc) away, he replied: “you praise my father because he did not take them away. I have not taken them away either. Did then my father restore them, that you can demand that I must restore (*reddere*) them? Finally, even if my father had restored them, my brother [Gratian] took them away, and in this I would rather imitate my brother.”

The same phrase, *iura templorum*, equated with the “unholy prerogatives of their priest-hoods” and the “performance of their sacred rites.” Later in the speech Ambrose describes how the day before his death Valentinian had again “refused the privileges of the temples” (*templorum privilegia denegavit*), repeating this formula on the following page.⁴³ The senatorial embassy had evidently pointed out to Valentinian that his father had *not* taken away the “rights of the temples,” suggesting that he should follow his father’s rather than his brother’s example.⁴⁴ “Rights” and “privileges” of the temples are vague phrases, but surely imply temple estates rather than the privileges of the Vestals. If so, then these rights were evidently not withdrawn until after Valentinian I—and so by Gratian. There may also be another text. Zeno, bishop of Verona, attacks landowners who allegedly protect “smoking shrines” on their estates and are “struggling every day to hang on to their temple rights.”⁴⁵ Landowners struggling to hang on to their “temple rights” look very much like Symmachus and his pagan peers in the 380s.⁴⁶

Presumably till then the social standing and influence of the aristocratic priests of the state cults (Ch. 4) had secured exemption for the Roman temple estates. We may recall the case of the 364 law forbidding nocturnal sacrifices.⁴⁷ Praetextatus, then pro-consul of Achaëa, obtained an exemption for the Eleusinian Mysteries, presumably

42. *sacerdotiorum profana privilegia*, *De ob. Val.* 19; Liebeschuetz 2005, 373, translates *profana* “secular,” but compare *sacrificiorum profanorum* and *sacrificiis profanis* (*Ep.* 72. 3 and 9).

43. *De ob. Val.* 52 and 55.

44. “What his father had omitted he completed, what his brother had decided he safeguarded,” Ambrose, *ib.* 55.

45. *ius templorum ne quis eripiat cotidie litigatis*, *Tract.* i. 25. 89.

46. Zeno’s exact dates are unknown; his death is usually placed ca. 379, but links with Ambrose’s *De officiis* (Lizzi 1990, 162) from the mid-380s would support a date after 384 (cf. Lizzi 1989, 4 n. 8).

47. Nocturnal sacrifices had always been forbidden because of their presumed association with black magic. When accused of performing *nocturna sacra* two hundred years earlier, Apuleius did not dare to belittle the charge, and concentrated his defence on discrediting the evidence (bird feathers and soot) and the accuser (*Apol.* 57–60).

protesting that the emperors cannot have meant to include such age-old and (above all) respectable rites in their ban.⁴⁸ In a letter to his brother Celsinus Titianus, precisely datable shortly before his death in 380 while *vicarius* of Africa, Symmachus reports that a pontifical treasurer (*pontificalis arcarius*) called Rufus is visiting Africa to maintain the college's rights to its estates in Vaga, an ancient city 105 km west of Carthage (an episcopal seat for at least 150 years).⁴⁹ He urges Titianus to do all that is in his official power and personal zeal to help Rufus.⁵⁰ As late as 380 the Vaga estates were threatened but not yet lost to the college of pontiffs.⁵¹ One of the laws cited above reveals that some African "temple revenues" had still not been reassigned as late as 408.

These revenues no doubt paid for a multitude of routine expenses connected with the state cults over and above the cost of sacrificial animals. But nothing upset Christians so much as the idea of animal sacrifice. Whether or not public celebrations of the state cults were still accompanied by sacrifice as late as the 380s (below), since few Christians were likely to watch them and know for sure, it was safe for Christian polemic to focus on this aspect. The hostile language of both Ambrose and the laws is enough to suggest why Symmachus avoided explicit mention of estates that he knew would be characterized as "paying for sacrifice." He alludes just once to the expense of what he refers to by the vague term *caerimoniae*. Better to focus on Victory and Vestals. His concentration on the Vestals can in fact be reconciled with the traditional interpretation. The writings of the land surveyors frequently mention estates owned by the Vestals,⁵² and it may be that it was mainly the income from these estates that kept the state cults going.⁵³ The ban on legacies was presumably intended to bar rich pagans from circumventing the confiscations by leaving the Vestals new estates. But whether or not it was temple estates separate from the Vestals' estates that Gratian confiscated, curiously little attention has been paid in the past to the sheer number of attempts made to get them restored. It was enough to assume that the men involved were pagan fanatics. But even so that would not explain why the *financing* of the cults was apparently felt to be so crucial.

Why was the money so important? Some scholars have argued that it was simply the expense of the cults that most concerned Symmachus and his peers. Paschoud saw Symmachus himself as a miserly parvenu, unwilling to part with his own money.⁵⁴ According to McGeachy, "Control of the priesthoods meant control of landed estates" and "Roman paganism, deprived of government support, would no longer be a source

48. Zosimus iv. 3. 2–4. All senior officials had to come from one or the other of two families, the Eumolpidae and Kerukes: Kevin Clinton, *The Sacred Officials of the Eleusinian Mysteries* (1974).

49. *Ep.* 68, with Callu's note. On Vaga, Lepelley, *Les cités* ii. 228–30 (not citing this text).

50. *ut sequestratum paulisper officium regressus adripiat.*

51. These estates must have supported Roman rather than local temples, if a pontifical *arcarius* was involved.

52. Campbell 2000, 71, 83, 85, 131, 185; for commentary, 361–62; Wildfang 2006, 70–73.

53. It should be added that the Vestals played a role in at least ten annual public festivals: Wildfang 2001, 223–56.

54. Paschoud 1967, 79–83; Cameron 1999, 477–505, showing that the family goes back at least to the third century.

of income and prestige to the aristocracy.⁵⁵ But there were a great many priests, and it is unlikely that there was enough of a surplus to contribute substantially to the wealth of any individual priest. We happen to know the emoluments of Arval brethren: from the reign of Trajan right down to the 220s they received the princely *sportula* of 100 denarii each time they participated in the annual banquet.⁵⁶

The altar of Victory has always been the center of attention for modern scholars, but pagans would hardly have been satisfied if Gratian or Valentinian II had given way on the sole issue of the altar but stood firm on cult subsidies. When giving a brief history of the issue in a letter to Eugenius, Ambrose summarizes the goal of Symmachus's *relatio* as "restoring (*reddi*) what was withdrawn from the temples," identified a couple of sentences later with "the expense of sacrifice," without even mentioning the altar.⁵⁷ A page or so later he characterizes the petitions to Eugenius himself in the same words: "the envoys asked you to restore [subsidies] to the temples" (*petierunt legati ut templis redderes*). This formula in effect excludes the altar, which pagans wanted restored to the senate house, not a temple. In his funerary speech on Valentinian II a year earlier Ambrose described the senatorial envoys as coming "to recover the rights of the temples and the unholy privileges of their priesthoods," again without even mentioning the altar of Victory. Clearly the subsidies were the real issue.

According to three separate passages of Zosimus, the key fact about the traditional pagan rituals of Rome was that they had to be performed publicly and at public expense. If true, this would explain all those embassies. First a passage (iv. 59. 3) that represents Theodosius coming to Rome after the Frigidus and telling Roman senators that

the treasury was burdened by the expense of rites and sacrifices and that he wished to abolish them, not only because he did not approve of them, but also because the army needed more funds. Although the senators said that rites not performed *at public expense* were not performed properly, for this reason the rite of sacrifice ceased, and other rituals handed down from their forefathers were abandoned.

The second (v. 38) describes how Stilicho's wife, Serena, removed a necklace from a statue of Cybele and disrespected a Vestal,

when Theodosius the elder came to Rome after the suppression of the tyrant Eugenius and instilled in everyone a contempt of the holy rites by refusing to finance religion with *public money*. The priests and priestesses were driven out and the temples deprived of all worship.

55. McGeachy 1942, 151 and 142; against, Baynes 1955, 361–66.

56. Nos. 64. I. 51 and II. 39; 68. II. 21; 69. 55; 94. III. 14; 99a. 16; 100b. 19; 102. 3 in Scheid 1998; Syme 1980, 112; and Scheid 1990b, 514–16, 529–30.

57. *templis quae sublata fuerant reddi. . . . sumptus sacrificiorum* (*Ep. extra coll.* 10. 2).

There are problems with both texts, first because Theodosius did not go to Rome after the Frigidus;⁵⁸ and second because, while the detail about the end of sacrifice fits Theodosius's ban on sacrifice, the speech about the expense of sacrifice fits Gratian much better. The senators' response implies that this was the first time the question of the cost of the cults had come up, and here the contemporary evidence of Symmachus and Ambrose points unmistakably to Gratian's measures in 382. It looks as if Zosimus, who apparently knew nothing about Gratian's anti-pagan measures, mistakenly ascribed them to Theodosius (Ch. 17. 6). He would not be the first to make this error. Quodvultdeus of Carthage, writing between 445 and 451, claims that Symmachus's speech about the altar of Victory was addressed to Theodosius,⁵⁹ and we find a similar error in the manuscript tradition of the third *Relatio* itself, which give the addressee as Theodosius instead of Valentinian.⁶⁰ Zosimus's coverage of fourth-century western affairs is thin, but this is not (I suspect) the only reason he fails to mention the altar of Victory, since this is a silence he shares with all the ecclesiastical historians (even Rufinus, writing in Aquileia in 402) and all the chroniclers. In fact, it is worth pointing out that, if Ambrose had not taken it upon himself to intervene, we would only have known about Gratian's measures and the senatorial protests from Symmachus's speech. While causing great distress to the pagan senators of Rome, Gratian's measures seem to have made little impression anywhere else. It was Theodosius who went down in history as the emperor who proscribed paganism, and it is perhaps not surprising that Gratian's contribution was transferred to his more celebrated successor.

The third text is the story of the Etruscan *haruspices* in 408, who claimed to know a ritual that would drive Alaric away from Rome, but only "if it was performed at public expense, with the senate going up to the Capitol and performing the appropriate ceremonies both there and in the fora of the city" (Ch. 5. 3). The fact that all three Zosiman texts emphasize the need for public funding and public performance supports the conclusion that all derive from the same pagan source consulted by his source Olympiodorus during his Roman visit.⁶¹ Despite the confusion about emperor and context, the detail about the need for public funding of the cults is intrinsically plausible. It fits the clear distinction drawn by the Antonine antiquary Pompeius Festus between "public rituals, which are performed on behalf of the people *at public expense*" and "private rituals, which are performed for individual men, families and households."⁶²

58. Cameron 1968 at 248–65 argued in favor of this visit in 394, but I now believe that Ensslin 1953 was right to reject it; see too Döpp 1975, 73–83.

59. Quodvultdeus, *Livre des promesses* iii. 38. 41, R. Braun II (ed.) (Paris 1964), 568.

60. Ambrose (of course) knew that it was addressed to Valentinian (*rettulerat vir amplissimus Symmachus, cum esset praefectus urbis, ad Valentinianum, Ep. 57. 2*).

61. The story of Serena's impiety during Theodosius's visit in 394 is a back reference in Zosimus's account of her execution in 409; so both references to the visit probably derive from Olympiodorus, whose narrative began in 407.

62. Festus, *De verborum significatu*, 284. 18 Lindsay; Ulpian, *Dig. 1.1.1.2*.

That the state cults of Rome were indeed financed from public funds is a solidly documented fact.⁶³

No other text says that they *had* to be paid for by the state or that they *had* to be performed publicly. But then neither issue had come up before. Until Gratian, everything to do with the state cults had been paid for out of public funds, and until Theodosius all rituals of the state cults had been performed publicly. It was not till Gratian and Theodosius that Roman pagans were faced, first with the withdrawal of public funds, and then with being forbidden to perform their rituals publicly. It was entirely natural that they should have protested that public funding and public performance were indispensable features of the traditional cults.

If it is the indispensability of public funding that lies behind Symmachus's *Relatio* and the series of pagan embassies to court, then it is unlikely that Gratian's confiscation of the relevant funds (whether temple or Vestal estates) was perceived by anyone except Roman pagans as a new policy, a concerted assault on Roman paganism. Emperors from Constantine on had been confiscating civic revenues all over the empire, temple estates among them, as part of a general policy of exercising tighter control over civic finances. Julian briefly restored estates confiscated by Constantius, but most of them were again confiscated by Valentinian and Valens.⁶⁴ If the Roman temple estates managed to escape confiscation, it was only a matter of time before a government in urgent need of money to pay troops finished the job. In 382, in the aftermath of Adrianople, raising troops was a priority, whereas in 394–95 Theodosius had more troops than he knew how to handle (p. 119). There was no reason why Gratian or his advisers should have anticipated the indignant senatorial reaction. Members of the priestly colleges were wealthy men who could easily have paid for the expenses of the festivals and the stipends of the Vestals and temple personnel out of their own pockets.

Why then were they reluctant to foot the bill themselves? As we shall see in more detail in chapter 4, there is an obvious sense in which the leaders of Roman paganism were the pontiffs and other *publici sacerdotes*. But however seriously they took their duties, these were not men who had devoted their lives to a religion they had in their maturity been elected to represent and defend. Take Symmachus himself, a loyal pagan who had done his duty in 382 and 384, yet a moderate, respected by Christians and pagans alike. If he had made good the loss of public money for financing the state cults, he would have been accused, to use Ambrose's phrase, of "paying for sacrifice." Not many pagans can have been willing to embrace so total an identification with the state cults.

63. Liebenam 1900; Marquardt 1884, 78–87; see too Rives 1995, 28–39; § 77 of the *lex Irnitana* gives regulations for expenditure on *sacra* (J. González [ed.] with M. H. Crawford, *JRS* 76 [1986], 173, 224). The financing of cult is also prominently detailed in the Caesarian *Lex Coloniae Genetivae* (M. H. Crawford, *Roman Statutes* [1996], no. 25).

64. Delmaire 1989, 641–45; Liebeschuetz 2001, Ch. 5, esp. 175–77; Goddard, in Ghilardi, Goddard, and Porena 2006, 282–88.

Private contributions had always been encouraged. In earlier times the rich and ambitious had paid for the building and repair of temples as well as baths, porticos, bridges, and aqueducts, in part at least because such expenditure reinforced their standing as public benefactors. We know of four cases of restoration of pagan temples in late fourth-century Rome. In 357/9, Symmachus's father-in-law, Orfitus, restored a temple of Apollo; in 367/8, Praetextatus restored the portico of the Dei Consentes in the Forum and demolished private buildings that had been erected too close to temples; in 374, Claudius Hermogenianus Caesarius repaired the portico of the temple of Bonus Eventus damaged by a flood; and between November 375 and August 378, Sempronius Faustus, prefect of the corn supply, restored the temple and portico of Isis at Portus, the latest datable official restoration of a pagan temple in the name of the emperors.⁶⁵ The first three are all known from other sources to have been pagans.

Praetextatus's dedication of the portico of the Dei Consentes characterizes the statues as *sacosancta simulacra*, but it is going too far to interpret the (heavily restored) formula *cultu in f[ormam antiquam restituto]* as implying a restoration of *cult* rather than just ornamentation.⁶⁶ Philippus, PVR ca. 400, restored a nymphaeum *ad pristinum cultum*; Roman nymphaea were not cult sites.⁶⁷ It is also important to add that, since all these men were acting in their official capacity as prefects of the city, they were not spending their own money. The same applies to the case from Ostia; a *praefectus annonae* was likewise entitled to draw on public funds. The main role of Isis in the harbor of Rome was as patron of the corn supply, and so her temple was appropriately restored by the *praefectus annonae* at public expense (p. 695).

By the fourth century, many of Rome's centuries-old public buildings and monuments were inevitably in urgent need of restoration. In 366 Symmachus père restored the Aurelian bridge; in 377 Probianus restored the Basilica Julia; in 414 Albinus restored baths on the Aventine; ca. 443 Quadratianus restored the baths of Constantine.⁶⁸ In every case these were projects undertaken or supervised by prefects of Rome in office. At any given moment there must have been a long list of buildings in need of restoration, from which new prefects would presumably choose. It was probably only the more committed pagans who opted for temples. There must have been many who took care to choose less controversial projects such as bridges, baths, or aqueducts. One example is Volusianus Lampadius, a *pontifex Solis* and tauroboliate. During his two year tenure of office (365–66) he sponsored more restorations than any other prefect we know of: he erected or moved a number of statues;⁶⁹ restored a *castellum* for the Aqua Claudia;⁷⁰ and claimed to have restored no fewer than thirteen bridges between Rome

65. Ward-Perkins 1984, 88; Chastagnol 1969, 135–44. For a different perspective, Lizzi Testa 2001, 671–707.

66. *ILS* 4003; Bloch 1945, 203–9; Kahlos 1995, 41.

67. Known from three dedications: *CIL* vi. 1728 and 31912, with *CIL* vi. 8. 3 (2000), 4785; see p. 518.

68. For the sources and a few other examples, Ward-Perkins 1984, 42, 187.

69. Listed by Chastagnol, 1962, 168–69.

70. *CIL* vi.3866 = 31963 = *ILS* 5791.

and Ostia.⁷¹ More generally, Ammianus mocks him for having his name inscribed on buildings as though he had built rather than just restored them.⁷² But despite his obvious personal religiosity (p. 144), not a single temple.

The choices made by Orfitus and Praetextatus drew attention to their commitment to maintain the deteriorating fabric of Rome's temples, a commitment that was still acceptable to popular opinion in the 350s and 360s. Nor was it their own money they were spending. As for both Praetextatus and Claudius, it was not actual temples they restored, but their porticos, public areas outside the temples. Faustus also restored the portico of the temple of Isis at Portus. There is no record of any temples restored by either of the Symmachi,⁷³ and while the elder Flavian was never prefect of Rome, the younger Flavian was, and so far as we know he restored no temples either.

The fact that no known temple restoration can be dated later than the 370s has been linked to Gratian's measures: "In 382 a decree was issued banning the use of public funds on pagan temples."⁷⁴ That is to say, it is assumed that pagans were eager to restore temples, and had to be prevented by law. There is certainly no evidence for any such ban. The reassignment of temple revenues would have removed one possible source of funding, but there was nothing to stop a pagan using his own money if he wanted. Chastagnol combined the absence of dated temple restorations after 378 with his own identification of the Philippus who played a role in the erection of the church of S. Paolo fuori le mura in 390 as city prefect, and concluded that in 382 pagan temples lost their status as public monuments, which was transferred to Christian churches.⁷⁵ He took it for granted that Gratian embarked on a radical policy of eliminating paganism in 382. But it was only two years later, in 384, that Valentinian II authorized Praetextatus and Symmachus to restore looted statues to their temples.

It is in fact clear from the pronouncements of successive western governments down to the Ostrogoths that Roman temples continued to be considered public monuments, and were protected under dire penalties from spoliation.⁷⁶ An edict of Honorius in 399 reveals that zealots had been producing laws forbidding sacrifice as justification for destroying or despoiling them.⁷⁷ While no temple is known to have been restored later than 378, it was not the intention of either emperors or kings that such prominent monuments in the city center should be left to collapse. In 510/11 Theodoric complained that temples that he had "assigned for repair have instead been given over to demolition."⁷⁸ The fact that it has survived to the present day in such excellent shape suggests that the Pantheon was carefully maintained during the two centuries when it

71. *AE* 1975, n. 134 (more bridges than were previously known to exist).

72. *Amm. Marc.* 27. 3. 7.

73. For the temple of Flora see Ch. 8. 4.

74. Meiggs 1973, 593; so too Ward-Perkins 1984, 86; Kahlos 1995, 40.

75. Chastagnol 1966, 436–37; and 1969, 142–43; on the identification of this Philippus, p. 518.

76. See now Fauvinet-Ranson 2006, 116, 213–17, 234–36, 277–79.

77. *Cod. Theod.* 16. 10. 15; cf. *Nov. Maj.* 4. 1–2; Goddard 2006, 282–86.

78. Cassiod. *Variae* iii. 31. 4 (trans. Barnish); Fauvinet-Ranson 2006, 116.

was no longer an active temple and before it was turned into the church of S. Maria ad martyres in the early seventh century. An imperial rescript of 368 or 370 was “read in the Pantheon,” presumably now used as some sort of assembly hall.⁷⁹ As late as 472/73 the city prefect Anicius Acilius Aginatus Faustus restored, not indeed a temple, but a statue of Minerva damaged by the collapse of a roof in a fire during a civil disturbance.⁸⁰

The decline of temple restorations by prominent pagans is surely due less to legal prohibitions than to their increasing reluctance to be identified with sacrifice. There is very little evidence for private patronage of the state cults in the fourth century as a whole.⁸¹ By the last decades of the century pagan senators may have felt that contributing to the repair of a pagan temple identified them too conspicuously with a now increasingly unpopular cause.

2: PONTIFEX MAXIMUS

That leaves Gratian’s repudiation of “the ancient pagan title of *pontifex maximus*,” allegedly “an uncompromising break with polytheism and the old gods of Rome.”⁸² But it is not easy to see why this should have been such a decisive signal to the pagans of Rome. It was almost four centuries since the office had been held by a Roman aristocrat, and during that period its imperial holders had vastly expanded its scope and powers.⁸³ To give a single illustration, from as early as Augustus emperors were regularly consulted and gave detailed rulings on the qualifications for and privileges of the Eleusinian priesthoods at Athens.⁸⁴ While first- and second-century emperors had at least spent much of their time in Rome and so fulfilled the primary obligations of the office toward the civic cults of Rome, by the 380s it had been well over a century since any emperor had resided in Rome. Constantine paid three brief visits (312, 315, and 326), Constantius II one (357), Theodosius one (389), and Gratian himself not even one. Constantius’s visit was probably the last occasion on which an emperor had attended to pontifical business in person.

The date and context of Gratian’s repudiation have been much debated over the years, but the most basic question of all has not been raised since the seventeenth century. Did it happen at all?⁸⁵ The only source is a digression on the *pontifex maximus* in a chapter of Zosimus shot through with absurdities and errors from start to finish (Ch. 17. 8). Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scholars denounced it as a pagan

79. *Cod. Theod.* xiv. 3. 10 (*lecta in Pantheo*).

80. *simulacrum Minerbae*, *CIL* vi. 526 = *ILS* 3132; Frascchetti 1999, 157–70; Orlandi 2004, 475.

81. Ward-Perkins 1984, 87.

82. Chadwick 1976, 114. For a more sceptical assessment, Errington 1997, 33 n. 63; Leppin 2003, 246 n. 84.

83. Gordon in Beard and North 1990, 201–34; Millar 1977, 447–56. After 204 there is no record of any emperor taking part “in the periodic meetings of any college” (Rüpke 2008, 60).

84. Millar 1977, 449–50.

85. This section repeats material from the fuller treatment in Cameron 2007, 341–84.

slander, refusing to believe that any Christian emperor had ever consented to accept the office in the first place. But the evidence of inscriptions now makes it certain that they did. If the first few Christian emperors accepted the title, sooner or later (it might seem) one *must* have refused it, and, given the explicit testimony of Zosimus that it was Gratian, the apparently concerted measures of Gratian against the Roman cults seemed to provide the obvious context. It has also been taken for granted that all subsequent Christian emperors followed suit.

The first problem is Zosimus's claim that Gratian refused the pontifical robe when the pontiffs brought it to him at the beginning of his reign (367). For a Roman inscription of 370 shows Valentinian, Valens, and Gratian all bearing the title.⁸⁶ Nor can we interpret the beginning of his reign as the moment when he became senior western Augustus on Valentinian's death in 375 or even sole ruling Augustus on Valens's death in 378. For in his *Gratiarum actio* of 379 Ausonius compares Gratian to Vestal, *flamen* and *pontifex* in his chastity,⁸⁷ and even compares the "election" for his own consulate to the pontifical elections, "seeing that you [Gratian] who presided over them are *pontifex maximus* and a participator in the designs of God" (§ 42). On the grounds that Theodosius "never used or refused the title," Alföldi argued that it must have been dropped by January 379, the date of Theodosius's accession.⁸⁸ But this still runs up against Ausonius, who did not deliver his speech till the second half of 379, at court in Trier. Could Ausonius, himself a Christian, have been so gauche as to use this of all imagery if the emperor who had appointed him consul had so recently rejected the title on religious grounds?

The fact that Theodosius is never attested with the title proves nothing. Two dedications come into play (*ILS* 780 and 781), but it is not just *pontifex maximus* they lack, but the whole of the second half of the standard litany of imperial titles. In illustration here is Gratian's full style as given on the 370 inscription, as it happens the latest known inscription to offer the full style:⁸⁹

Fl. Gratianus pius felix maximus victor ac triumphator semper Augustus, *pontifex maximus*, Germanicus maximus, Alamannicus maximus, Francicus maximus, Gothicus maximus, *tribuniciae potestatis III*, *imperator II*, *consul primum*, *pater patriae*, *proconsul*.

The full style had become exceptionally rare by this date. There are in fact only three other examples known for the half-century after Constantine, one each for Constantius II, Julian, and Valentinian.⁹⁰ The great majority of fourth-century and all

86. *ILS* 771; *CIL* ii. 450*–452*, purporting to be milestones naming Valentinian, Valens, and Gratian as *pontifex maximus* in the neighbourhood of Emerita, are all forged on the basis of *ILS* 771.

87. § 66; cf. too *Augustus sanctitate, pontifex religione* (§ 35); Rüpke 2008, 63.

88. Alföldi 1937, 37.

89. *ILS* 771, with abbreviations expanded for the sake of clarity.

90. *ILS* 732 and 753; *CIL* ii. 4733 (known only from eighteenth-century copies) from Corduba for Valentinian (*cos. II* and so 368, though Hübner suggested *cos. III* for *cos. II p.p.*, which would give 373).

later dedications commemorating emperors offer (omitting victory titles) only *pius felix maximus victor ac triumphator semper Augustus* (or some minor variation). Since it is only in the full titulature that we ever find *pontifex maximus* (together with the entire sequence from *tribuniciae potestatis* to *proconsul*, italicized above), it is not significant that the two inscriptions naming Theodosius, both of which offer the now standard abbreviated titulature, do not include it. Since we have no edicts or letters of Theodosius I offering the full titulature, there is simply no way of knowing whether he used or refused the title of *pontifex maximus*.

There is in fact no reason to believe that the full style was ever formally abolished or even significantly modified. This is more than an argument from silence, nor is it a mere technicality. Though extremely rare, it nonetheless survived for at least another century and a half. There is one example each from the fifth and sixth centuries: an edict of Marcian and Valentinian III from 452; and a letter of Anastasius from 516. Remarkably enough, given the protracted discussion about Gratian's repudiation of the title, no one seems to have appreciated the significance of the fact that both documents include the title *pontifex*.

Here is the style accorded Valentinian III and Marcian in an imperial letter dated 7 February 452 (correcting a few obviously corrupt minor details):⁹¹

Imperatores Caesares Flavius Valentinianus, *pontifex inclitus*, Germanicus *inclitus*, Alamannicus *inclitus*, <Francicus *inclitus*,> Sarmaticus *inclitus*, tribuniciae potestatis vicies septies, imperator vicies septies, <consul septies> et Flavius Marcianus, *pontifex inclitus*, Germanicus *inclitus*, Sarmaticus *inclitus*, Alamannicus *inclitus*, Francicus *inclitus*, tribuniciae potestatis ter, imperator iterum, consul.

And here is the style of Anastasius in a letter addressed to the senate of Rome in 516:⁹²

Imperator Caesar Flavius Anastasius, *pontifex inclitus*, Germanicus *inclitus*, Francicus *inclitus*, Sarmaticus *inclitus*, tribunici<ae potestatis XXV>, imper<ator> XXV, consul tertio, pius, felix, victor ac triumphator semper Augustus, pater patriae, proconsul.

These are official documents.⁹³ If we compare the titulature of these two letters with the 370 dedication of Valentinian I, Valens and Gratian, the only difference (apart

91. ACO 2. 3. 346. 38–347. 3; for details, Barnes, *Roman Emperors*, forthcoming, Ch. 2. To the best of my knowledge, the first scholar to mention these texts in this connection was P. Batiffol in *Bulletin de la société nationale des antiquaires de France* 1926, 222–27, but they have been ignored in recent discussions.

92. *Coll. Avell.* no. 113, with Barnes, forthcoming.

93. Paschoud 2006, 69, dismisses these imperial letters as “des éléments ténus et très postérieurs,” despite the fact that the first at any rate is a half-century earlier than Zosimus, and both are official documents!

from iteration numbers and victory titles) is the substitution of *inclitus* for *maximus* throughout. So systematic a change must be both intentional and official. From the late second century on emperors often added a *maximus* to their victory titles (*Parthicus maximus* and the like). This *maximus* too was regularly replaced by *inclitus* in the fifth century. In 312 Constantine assumed a *maximus* to indicate that he was senior Augustus, and most of his successors followed suit. By the fifth and sixth centuries this *maximus* as well was usually changed to *inclitus*.⁹⁴ Surprising though it might seem, *maximus* and *inclitus* apparently came to be felt as in some way equivalent imperial titles.

The inclusion of iteration numbers for the emperor's *tribunicia potestas* and the titles *pater patriae* and *proconsul* in the titlature of Valentinian III, Marcian, and Anastasius may fairly be seen as meaningless antiquarian survivals. But the case of *pontifex* cannot be dismissed so lightly. Proof that it is to be taken seriously, now explicitly reinterpreted in a Christian sense, is provided by a number of acclamations addressed to both Marcian and Theodosius II in the *Acta* of the Council of Chalcedon: "emperor and priest, you have restored the church, pious and orthodox, pious emperor, emperor and priest" (*pontifici imperatori, ecclesias tu correxisti; pio et orthodoxo, pio imperatori, pontifici imperatori*).⁹⁵

If Gratian repudiated the title of *pontifex maximus*, how is it that we find Valentinian III, Marcian, and Anastasius not only continuing to style themselves *pontifex* in formal documents, but in effect the fifth-century equivalent of *pontifex maximus*? Ullmann, the only scholar to attempt an explanation, suggested that the title had been recently revived at this period, in connection with contemporary disputes about papal primacy.⁹⁶ Yet if Gratian had repudiated the title on the grounds that he was a Christian, how could a later Christian emperor have revived it? We are bound to wonder whether *any* emperor *ever* formally and finally repudiated the title. All we can say with certainty is that it does not appear in the abbreviated titlature in general use. Whatever Gratian did and whenever he did it, it is an inescapable fact that Marcian and Valentinian III are formally styled *pontifex* (if *inclitus* rather than *maximus*) in an official document of 452.

What then are we to make of Zosimus's digression? However distorted and fictionalized in its present form, it must conceal some initiative taken by Gratian concerning the imperial pontificate. Every emperor up to and including Gratian was styled *pontifex maximus*, later emperors *pontifex inclitus*. In 382 Gratian in effect disestablished the state cults of Rome, provoking controversy and protest. In the course of these protests he was (I suggest) reminded that he was in fact *ex officio* head of these cults. One response would have been to repudiate the title. Instead he surely disputed so restricted an interpretation of his religious authority. Pagan senators of Rome may well have continued to look on the imperial *pontifex maximus* as head of the state cults

94. Kienast 1996, 40–44, 26; Dessau's index to *ILS* iii. 1. 307–13; Rösch 1978, 159–71.

95. Theodosius: *ACO* II. 1. 1, p. 138. 28 Schwartz; II. 2. 1, p. 54. 7; II. 3. 1, p. 121. 6. Marcian: *ACO* II. 2. 2, p. 102. 21; II. 1. 2, p. 353. 29; II. 3. 2, p. 438. 35; II. 3. 2, p. 439. 17. The Greek versions offer ἱερεὶ or ἀρχιερεὶ.

96. "die Wiederaufnahme des Pontifex-Titels," Ullmann 1977, 27.

of Rome. But this was far too narrow a definition of the priestly powers of even Augustus, let alone Constantine. For centuries now the emperors had claimed authority over all forms of religious expression within Roman territory.

Since the term *pontifex*, taken by itself, was acceptable to Christians, the obvious solution was to modify the title by removing the *maximus*, and thereby signal the dissolution of its link with the state cults of Rome. An *alternative* limiting or defining epithet was then required, one that would distinguish the imperial *pontifex* from both pagan *pontifex* and Christian priest. For whatever reason, *inclitus* was the epithet chosen. And once the *maximus* in *pontifex maximus* became *inclitus*, there was a certain logic in changing every *maximus* in the imperial titulature to *inclitus*.⁹⁷

Always an elevated, archaic word, at home in epic and the historians, it was (it seems) precisely in the 380s that *inclitus*⁹⁸ made its rather surprising entry into the imperial titulature.⁹⁹ The earliest inscriptional examples are dated to 400/401 and 418.¹⁰⁰ But in his *Relationes*, official requests and reports addressed to court in his capacity as prefect of Rome in the course of 384, just two years after Gratian's measures, Symmachus regularly styles Valentinian II and Theodosius *incli tyi victores ac triumphatores semper Augusti* (or something very similar), no fewer than ten times.¹⁰¹

On the traditional assumption, Christian emperors continued to bear the title *pontifex maximus* as long as they did so as not to antagonize their pagan subjects, still in a majority in the early decades of the fourth century. Though not false, this is nonetheless a misleading perspective. According to Dio, writing of Augustus but from the perspective of the third century, in virtue of their tenure of the supreme pontificate the emperors "control all sacred and religious matters."¹⁰² The emperor gradually came to monopolize the role of symbolic religious mediator for the whole empire. While Constantine and his Christian successors did not (of course) directly invoke their pontifical authority, it was in effect in this capacity that they legislated about church affairs, endowed churches and convoked councils to deliberate church doctrine.¹⁰³ To surrender the office might have been held to weaken the emperor's claim to play this role in church affairs, a claim welcomed by most Christians in the heady days of the first Christian emperor, if increasingly questioned when some of his successors fell into heresy.

97. Not that *maximus* altogether disappears from imperial titles in the fifth century, as can be seen from the lists of documents and inscriptions in Rösch 1978.

98. For the various spellings, O. Prinz, "Inclutus," *Glotta* 29 (1942), 138–47; for more information, Cameron 2007.

99. *TLL* s.v. *inclitus* 2; O'Brien 1930, 135; the indexes (under emperors' names) to O. Guenther's *Collectio Avellana* (1895) and R. Schieffer's *Index Prosographicus* to *ACO* i–iv (1982); Rösch 1978, 44–45, 86–87.

100. *CIL* viii. 969; *Coll. Avellana* no. 14. 3 (p. 59. 16 Guenther); cf. too *Coll. Avellana* no. 35 (*Victor Honorius inclitus triumphator semper Augustus*). Two other African dedications with similar formulas fall between 395 and 408, and 383 and 408, respectively (Cagnat/Merlin, *Inscriptions latines d'Afrique* [Paris 1923], 276, 314.

101. For a complete list, Vera 1977, 1035–36; for further details, Cameron 2007.

102. Dio 53. 17. 8.

103. Voelkl 1964; Ullmann 1976, 1–16; with Barnes 1981, 49–51. More generally, see too the chapter "The emperor and his church" in Frend 1972, 50–103.

So Gratian did not after all repudiate the office of *pontifex maximus*. He redefined his priestly authority in less specific terms. His action was therefore less pointedly or dramatically anti-pagan than hitherto supposed. Indeed, it is far from clear that we are justified in identifying a drastic new policy toward paganism at all in 382. The questions of the altar of Victory and the confiscation of temple estates had both come up again and again before 382. It was not inevitable that pagans would take such a hard line about the need for public funding, and Gratian may well have been surprised by the inflexibility of the senatorial reaction. The altar and subsidies undoubtedly became a flashpoint in pagan-Christian relations in late fourth-century Rome, but not because of a premeditated imperial decision to eliminate paganism. It is important to bear in mind that Gratian did not ban the cults.

3: THEODOSIUS AND THE CULTS OF ROME

Little is known about the religious policies of Magnus Maximus (after his fall his *acta* were naturally annulled). He was a devout Christian who went down in history as the first Christian emperor to put a heretic to death.¹⁰⁴ It is not expressly attested that pagan senators petitioned him to restore the altar and subsidies, but the fact that Ambrose represents the dead Gratian telling Valentinian II not to do “what even the enemy who raised arms against him had not done”¹⁰⁵ strongly suggests that Maximus too formally rebuffed a senatorial embassy.

In August 388 Theodosius invaded Italy and defeated Maximus. While posing as the savior of Valentinian II, in practice he quietly marginalized the youth who was in fact the senior member of the imperial college. Pacatus Drepanius’s panegyric of July 389 before emperor and senate in Rome contrives to say almost nothing about Valentinian, while openly proclaiming that the future rulers of the Roman world will be the two (even younger) sons of Theodosius (*Pan. Theod.* 16. 5; 45. 3). During his visit to Rome, despite turning down another petition about the altar and subsidies late in 389, Theodosius took care to conciliate its governing class, pagans no less than Christians. His first appointment to the prefecture of Rome was the historian Aurelius Victor, followed by Rufius Albinus (Ch. 14. 2). In 389 the elder Flavian was appointed *quaestor sacri palatii*, and then the following year promoted to the praetorian prefecture of Italy, Africa, and Illyricum. Symmachus was designated to the extraordinary honor (for a civilian who had not held court office—and had supported Maximus) of ordinary consul for 391.

It is often asserted that Theodosius “fell under the spell” of these pagan grandees.¹⁰⁶ But not for long, because in February 391 he issued his celebrated law (discussed

104. Sulp. Severus, *Vita Mart.* 20; *Dial.* II. 6–7; Stancliffe 1983, 113, 129, 156; Birley 1983, 13–43.

105. Ambrose, *Ep.* 72. 16.

106. E.g., Bloch 1945, 222.

below) banning pagan sacrifice. Obsessed with the idea of pagan/Christian conflict, modern scholars tend to see Symmachus, Flavian, and Albinus first and foremost as pagan leaders and infer that all or most of their public actions were intended to further the pagan cause, and that any imperial gesture of favor to them was a concession to paganism. But this was only one aspect of their role in the social and political life of late antique Rome. What Theodosius saw was surely first and foremost immensely wealthy and influential landowners, men worth conciliating *despite* their paganism. Well aware that he had been compelled to oppose them on an issue they felt deeply about, he must have been apprehensive that, when he returned to the East, they might be tempted to throw their influence behind another usurper more willing than Maximus to give way on that issue. The obvious solution was to be as conciliatory as he could on other fronts—not unlike a Democratic president of the United States appointing one or two Republicans to key posts in his administration.

He pursued a similar policy in the East. On the death of his aggressively pious praetorian prefect Cynegius (384–88),¹⁰⁷ Theodosius turned to the pagan Tatianus (388–92), also appointing his son Proculus to the prefecture of Constantinople. In 391 Tatianus, like Cynegius, was accorded the honor of the consulate. The most natural explanation for these appointments is that, aware that Cynegius's excesses had caused ill will among the many remaining pagans, he decided to appoint a moderate, widely respected pagan in his place.

The *magister officiorum* Rufinus waged a campaign against Tatianus and Proculus, and eventually prevailed on Theodosius to depose them both and appoint him *praefectus praetorio*. Since Tatianus and Proculus were both pagans and Rufinus a fiercely committed Christian, few have been able to resist the temptation of seeing this as the cause of the hostility between the two factions. But that is not the way our most detailed source saw it, and since that source is the pagan Zosimus, we might have expected him to make the most of a Christian vendetta. There is probably no need to see any more here than the sort of struggle for power that goes on at every court. After all, it was the pious Theodosius who had appointed Tatianus and Proculus in the first place.

It is both implausible and unnecessary to see Theodosius going through a phase of being well disposed to pagans. The solution is simply that, in East and West alike, he did his best to work with traditional elites as far as he could, even when, like Tatianus, Symmachus, and Flavian, they were pagans. When he returned to the East he needed influential western supporters. His western designs were complex, not to say devious. In the short term it seems clear that he was planning to administer Italy, Illyricum, and Africa from Constantinople himself, and confine Valentinian II to the prefecture of Gaul, under the thumb of the (as he hoped) loyal Arbogast. In the long term he was evidently hoping to supersede this lone survivor of the previous dynasty with one of

107. For reservations about Cynegius's reputation as a destroyer of temples, see below p. 798.

his own sons when a suitable opportunity arose.¹⁰⁸ That opportunity was to arise sooner than he could have anticipated with the death of Valentinian in 392 and the usurpation of Eugenius. In 389–91, accompanied by the young Honorius, he spun out his western stay as long as he dared in the hope of creating a favorable climate for his more remote intentions. It was obvious that he could not count on the support of the independent Ambrose. Indeed, he could not *count* on anyone once he was back in the East.

Under the circumstances it is understandable that some of the pagan aristocrats he was courting should have misread his attentions and interpreted personal favors as favors transferable to the Roman cults. They were emboldened to repeat their petition. A senatorial embassy (a small one, according to Ambrose) tried to see Theodosius in Milan (apparently late in 389), unsuccessfully thanks to a personal (though evidently unwelcome) intervention by Ambrose (who admits that did not dare go near the emperor for several days afterwards).¹⁰⁹ Yet it is unlikely that either Symmachus or Flavian were among these petitioners. In 384 there had been a real possibility of Valentinian II returning to his father's policy of neutrality rather than reaffirming what had turned out to be the confrontational new policy of Gratian. It was a reasonable gamble that Valentinian would prefer to identify with his father than with the half-brother who had kept him under something close to house arrest (p. 646). But once he had reaffirmed Gratian's policy, it became impossible for any later Christian emperor to restore either altar or subsidies. Symmachus cannot have been willing to jeopardize his hard-won recovery from his earlier lapse of judgment in supporting Maximus.¹¹⁰ And Flavian is not likely to have been prepared to jeopardize his now flourishing career at court.

That there were still some pagan senators who felt strongly about the issue is proved by the fact that, once Theodosius was back in the East, yet another embassy was sent to Valentinian in Gaul, shortly before his death on 15 May 392, the fifth in total and the second to Valentinian.¹¹¹ Why did they think it worth trying Valentinian again? By confining Valentinian to Gaul, Theodosius was evidently hoping to prevent him establishing the sort of rapport with Italian landowners he himself had done his best to establish during his nearly three years in Italy. A fragment from the lost history of Sulpicius Alexander describes Valentinian as "shut up in his palace at Vienne," where for the remainder of his short life he was to be a puppet of Arbogast.¹¹² The senators were presumably trying to drive a wedge between Valentinian and Theodosius, "offering [him] an opportunity to outbid his partner."¹¹³ For while Theodosius

108. Presumably, he was planning to install Arcadius, already Augustus since 383, in Italy and Africa. Fortunately, for his future designs he was never faced with the complication of Valentinian II marrying and producing a son.

109. *senatus legatio... licet non totus senatus*, Ambr. *Ep.* 57. 4.

110. Just how hard won is explained in detail by Sogno 2006, 71–76.

111. (1) to Gratian (382); (2) to Valentinian II (384); (3) to Maximus; (4) to Theodosius (389).

112. Greg. Tur. *HF* ii. 9; Zos. iv. 53–54; McLynn 1994, 333–36.

113. McLynn 1994, 335.

continued to administer Italy, Africa, and Illyricum from Constantinople, Valentinian, technically senior Augustus, had administered Italy and Africa from Gratian's death till Maximus's invasion, and it was not clear that his writ no longer ran there. He may have been tempted by the senatorial invitation, but, no doubt under Arbogast's guidance, once again said no.

One other, less familiar text has a bearing on Valentinian II's attitude to pagan cults. While Roman state festivals were dependent on public funds, those provided by provincial priests were not.¹¹⁴ The most important text for the imperial cult in the new post-Diocletianic Italian provinces is the Hispellum inscription, banning sacrifice at a new cult of Constantine (p. 141). Scarcely less interesting is the so-called *Feriale Campanum*, an inscribed calendar found in the amphitheatre of Capua.¹¹⁵ It lists seven festivals "by command of the emperors" (*iussione domnorum*), dated to 22 November 387. By this date Maximus was master of Italy, but since 22 November is the anniversary of Valentinian II's proclamation, the document may have come from his court. Surprise has often been expressed that a Christian emperor should have authorized what have been called "provocatively non-Christian" festivals.¹¹⁶ But though undeniably *pre-Christian*, they are above all local celebrations ("a lustration to the *iter Dianae* on 25 July"; "a procession to the *iter Averni* on 27 July," etc). What we should be asking is why *any* emperor would be asked to authorize festivals that had surely been celebrated in Campania every year for centuries. In the light of the Hispellum inscription, the obvious explanation is that the provincial priest, one Romanus junior, was anxious to make sure that the festivals for which he was responsible conformed to the law. Accordingly (I suggest), he formally submitted to court a short list of seven festivals from which all objectionable features had been carefully removed. Did these pre-approved festivals survive the Theodosian ban on sacrifice? Probably—at least for a while. While churchmen no doubt railed against them as pagan abominations, emperors were reluctant to curtail the traditional pleasures of their subjects, so long as there were no offerings at altars or sacrifices.

4: THEodosius's ANTI-PAGAN LEGISLATION

It is commonly believed that, on Valentinian II's death, Arbogast and Eugenius soon succumbed to the continuing pressure from pagan senators in Rome and restored the altar of Victory and cult subsidies, the celebrated "last pagan revival." The notion that Eugenius's brief reign saw a pagan revival presupposes both that there is good evidence for such a revival, and that it was necessary because all forms

114. For what little is known about provincial priests in late antique Italy, see Cecconi 1994, 83–106.

115. A. Degrassi, *Inscr. Ital.* xiii. 2 (1963), 282–83 (with plate); Cecconi 101–5; Trout in Mathisen 1997, 162–78.

116. *iure mirandum est*, Degrassi l.c.; Trout 1997, 168.

of pagan worship had been finally and decisively forbidden by Theodosius. Both assumptions are highly dubious.

To take the second point first, it is a commonplace that the reign of Theodosius marked a turning point in the decline of paganism. This may be true, but it is far from certain that the explanation, hitherto taken for granted, is legislation. Theodosius's laws are assumed to be the result of (another) dramatic new policy shift, a long-meditated decision that the time had finally come to eliminate paganism: "the policy of tolerance until now observed in the West by Theodosius thus abruptly came to an end"; "The face Theodosius now presented [February 391] to the Western ruling classes was not the urbane ruler mixing easily with senate and people [as in 389], but the persecuting fanatic."¹¹⁷ Theodosius's anti-pagan legislation has been assumed to differ from all earlier anti-pagan laws in two ways: first, in going further than earlier laws; and second, in being enforced and effective. Neither point has ever been explicitly argued or documented; rather they are simply assumed as an inevitable corollary (and explanation) of the further assumption that Eugenius's rebellion represented a reaction to the new anti-pagan policy. A classic circular argument.

This new policy is supposed to be enshrined in three successive laws, issued in February 391 (from Aquileia), June 392 (from Milan), and November 392 (from Constantinople).¹¹⁸ The November 392 law is beyond question a comprehensive ban on pagan worship in every form, not only animal sacrifice, but offerings of incense, wine, and even garlands hung on trees, threatening offenders with confiscation of property. Whether it was systematically enforced is another matter, but given the brief interval between the three laws it is naturally tempting to take them together as a single initiative. The first was addressed to Rome, the second to Alexandria. According to Fowden, "The two cities thus singled out were potent symbols, both of catholic Christian dogma and, embarrassingly, of surviving polytheism. *But the constitutions were also intended for universal application.*"¹¹⁹ In illustration he cites an extract from the third law, addressed to the praetorian prefect of the East, as if the three laws were interchangeable and the third could be used to interpret the first two.

But how do we know if a given law was "intended for universal application"? In their full form (never preserved in the extracts included in the Theodosian Code), laws addressed to praetorian prefects sometimes close with some such instruction as the following: "cause this regulation to come to the knowledge of all by means of letters issued to the governor of each province, so that edicts duly posted shall publish this regulation to the whole world."¹²⁰ Thus an extract of a law in the Code addressed to a single provincial governor might be the only surviving copy of a law circulated by higher authority to

117. Bloch 1945, 223–24; Williams and Friell 1994, 70; for similar views, Fowden in *CAH* xiii (1998), 553; Ando 2001, 384–85.

118. *Cod. Theod.* xvi. 10. 10–12, with commentary by Rougé, Delmaire, and Richard 2005, 438–47.

119. Fowden, *CAH* xiii (1998), 553.

120. *Const. Sirm.* 9; cf. 16; Matthews 2000, 186.

all governors. Since the November 392 law was addressed to Rufinus, praetorian prefect of the East, we would be justified in assuming that copies were sent to all provincial governors within his jurisdiction. But the West was emphatically not within his jurisdiction.

It is *possible* that a similar law was sent to the praetorian prefect of Italy, Africa, and Illyricum—at this time the pagan Nicomachus Flavianus. But no such law survives, and there is no evidence for any such assumption in the law of February 391 addressed to the prefect of Rome. This law has been variously described as “a death sentence against paganism,” “the first edict to proscribe paganism,” the “legal death” of paganism, a “comprehensive ban on pagan sacrifice,” and “a trumpet blast to the pagans which...they heard and understood.”¹²¹ As already remarked, it is further assumed that it was in large measure the enforcement of this law that drove the last pagans of Rome to defend their way of life on the field of battle.

But if we look at the text of the law itself (or rather the excerpt preserved in the Theodosian Code), it is simply not the wide-ranging general prohibition of pagan cult so often assumed. Stock minatory rhetoric aside, its two provisions are (1) to ban sacrifice and (2) to ban access to temples. Unlike the law of November 392, it does *not* in fact ban all acts of pagan worship. Emperors had been forbidding sacrifice for three-quarters of a century. And though it is often implied that forbidding access to temples was an innovation,¹²² this too appears as early as a law of 356.¹²³ Indeed, it goes back before even Constantine to the age of Diocletian. In the Theodosian context it has naturally been assumed that the ban was directed at pagans. But canon 56 of the Council of Elvira (ca. 300) forbids *Christian* officials to set foot in pagan temples. For centuries, participating in sacrificial ceremonies had been a standard part of the duties of Roman magistrates. Local bigwigs who happened to be Christians were also expected to attend. Naturally, this was a problem for Christian officials, and the Elvira canons lay down very strict bans on participating in any way in sacrifice. A Constantinian law of 323 forbids Christian clergy to be “compelled” to “celebrate” sacrifices, presumably meaning attend ceremonies at which sacrifices were performed rather than actually perform ritual acts themselves. Eusebius claims that Constantine forbade pagan governors to sacrifice.¹²⁴ The law may in fact have forbidden all governors to sacrifice, but even if it was restricted to pagans, the point was presumably to prevent situations where Christian dignitaries might be pressured to participate. By the close of the century, we might suspect that the opposite situation was more common: compliant Christian dignitaries willing to attend such ceremonies, to the disgust of their more rigorist peers.

Nor does the law purport to be binding on the population at large. Its one novel feature is its concern to ban public officials from participating in sacrifice or entering

121. Piganiol 1975, 285; Palanque 1933, 251; N. King 1960, 78; cf. Stein 1959, 209; Chuvin 1990, 65; Lee 2000, 123.

122. “Mais il y ajoute l’interdiction de fréquenter les temples...,” Gaudemet 1972, 598.

123. *Cod. Theod.* xvi. 10. 4; on the date, Seeck 1919, 41–42.

124. *Cod. Theod.* xvi. 2. 5; Euseb. VC 2.44.

temples. Those found guilty of so doing will be liable to fines, ranging from four to fifteen pounds of gold. These are certainly stiff penalties, but why this particular emphasis? What was the overall purpose of the law? As recent research on the Theodosian Code has made abundantly clear, time and again if we look carefully at the text of a law addressed to a local official we find indications that it is the government's response to a specific request from that official to deal with a local situation.¹²⁵ That is to say, the surviving law is often, in effect, the original request sent to court by some local official, approved, reformulated, and returned to him as instructions.

In the case of the February 391 law, it looks as if Roman Christians had complained to court about public officials setting a bad example by attending pagan rituals and entering temples. It has (of course) been suggested that it is simply a copy of a more general law sent to the praetorian prefect of Italy,¹²⁶ but its provisions seem tailored specifically to the jurisdiction of the prefect of Rome, where the power of the land-owning aristocracy that traditionally monopolized both the prefecture of Rome and the Italian governorships must have made it particularly hard to enforce bans on sacrifice. Nothing in the text of this law as it has come down to us suggests that it is anything more than a response to a specific local situation rather than a dramatic new shift in Theodosius's policy toward paganism at large.

It is not likely that the surviving extract from the February 391 law simply happened to omit the more stringent and far-reaching provisions of the November 392 law sent to the prefect of the East. For the June 392 law, while briefer and differing in its verbal formulation, offers essentially the same provisions as the February 391 law, forbidding sacrifice and entering temples, and laying down fines for officials who enter temples. Moreover, its unique address to two different local officials, "Evagrius the Augustal prefect and Romanus, count of Egypt," strongly suggests that it was not a general law, but a rescript responding to a specific request, an assumption supported by the Alexandrian context.

The situation that provoked the request is well known.¹²⁷ Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria, had antagonized pagans by converting a disused temple into a church and exposing sacred objects to public ridicule; pagans responded by rioting. Rufinus, Socrates, and Sozomen all claim that an appeal was made to court, with Sozomen naming the officials who made the appeal as Evagrius the *praefectus augustalis* and Romanus the count of Egypt, both also named in a fifth-century Alexandrian chronicle and by the pagan Eunapius.¹²⁸ Theodosius is said to have responded with a rescript pardoning the rioters but ordering the destruction of the Serapeum. These are the same officials mentioned in the address to the 16 June law, though since it goes no

125. Harries and Wood 1993; Matthews 2000; Errington 2006.

126. Gaudemet 1972, 600.

127. For full documentation and bibliography, Thelamon 1981, 157–279; Baldini 1985, 97–152; Hahn 2008, 335–65.

128. Soz. *HE* vii. 15. 5; Eunapius gives Euetius (*VS* 472, vi. 11. 2), but no such prefect is known and Evagrius is the standard correction.

further than forbidding officials to enter temples, this cannot be the rescript the Christian writers describe. But since it is addressed, unusually, to the two officials involved in the eventual destruction of the Serapeum, it may reflect an earlier stage in a developing situation. But an imperial order to destroy a major functioning temple in a major city would be without parallel, and both pagan and Christian sources assign the primary responsibility to Theophilus. The final page of the Alexandrian chronicle carries on the left-hand side an illustration of Theophilus standing above Serapis holding a Bible, while on the right monks storm the Serapeum.¹²⁹ Theophilus may have claimed to be enforcing imperial orders, but surely exceeded them.

There is no basis for Fowden's suggestion that Rome and Alexandria were specially selected as hotbeds of paganism, ripe for a new Theodosian hard line. The truth is that the February 391 and June 392 laws do not go much beyond earlier laws banning sacrifice. It is the November 392 law, addressed to Rufinus as praetorian prefect of the East, that marks a new stage in anti-pagan legislation. Rather than Theodosius himself, it was surely Rufinus, a man of stern and conspicuous piety, who was the moving force behind this law, as he must have been for the very similar anti-pagan law issued on 7 August 395, seven months after Theodosius's death, and a series of laws against heretics, some before, some after Theodosius's death.¹³⁰ Whether even the November law was as inflexibly enforced as usually assumed is a question that need not trouble us for the moment. What matters in the present context is that there is no evidence that it was ever sent to Italy. This means that there is no solid evidence for any absolute Theodosian ban on pagan worship in the West before the rebellion of Eugenius.

The "dramatic new policy" interpretation is usually explained in terms of Theodosius falling under the influence of Ambrose, often spoken of as though documented fact.¹³¹ But there is not a shred of evidence for Ambrose exerting any such influence on Theodosius. At this juncture it is improbable. Ambrose himself admits that his interference in Theodosius's dealings with the senatorial embassy of 389 was unwelcome. According to the manuscripts, the emperor "agreed to my request (*insinuationi meae assensionem detulit*), and so (*sic*) for several days I did not approach him, nor did he take it amiss (*nec moleste tulit*), because he knew that I was not doing it for my own advantage, but for his and that of my soul."¹³² But if Theodosius agreed, why did Ambrose stay away? The Maurist editors inserted a *tandem*: "the emperor *eventually* agreed to my request." Liebeschuetz obtained much the same sense more neatly by emending *detulit* to *distulit*: "the emperor *delayed* his assent to my request." That is to say, on both versions Ambrose stayed away until Theodosius had reached a decision. Yet that still does not explain why Theodosius might have been expected to be angry. If Ambrose had not raised the issue himself, why should it ever have occurred to

129. For a reproduction with commentary, Hahn 2008, 364–65.

130. *Cod. Theod.* xvi. 10. 12–13 and xvi. 5. 23–26 (the last two dated 13 and 30 March 395).

131. The assumption is so widespread that it would be superfluous to cite authorities.

132. *Ep. extra coll.* 10. 4.

anyone that Theodosius was angry with him? That the emperor was indeed furious is put beyond doubt by another letter of Ambrose to Theodosius himself about the Thessalonica massacre written a month or two after this confrontation:¹³³

I saw that I alone of all your court had been stripped of the natural right of hearing, with the consequence that I had also been deprived of the power of speaking. *For you have frequently been offended because I obtained knowledge of a number of decisions taken in the consistory.* As a result, I no longer enjoy what is available to all, even though the lord Jesus says: “nothing is hidden that shall not be made manifest.” I nevertheless showed as much respect as I could to your imperial will, for I made sure that you would have *no cause for anger* by acting in such a way that it was impossible for any report relating to imperial decisions to reach me.

Not only was Ambrose not the emperor’s counsellor and confidant. Evidently, Theodosius was so angry that, for a while at least, he gave strict orders that Ambrose was not even to be told what was being discussed in the consistory. Apparently, he had been hoping to deal with the embassy about the subsidies before Ambrose heard about it. And yet this is the very moment when Theodosius is supposed to have fallen under Ambrose’s spell and decided on a tougher policy toward paganism.

On other grounds too the “dramatic new policy” assumption is far more problematic than usually recognized. It is important here to distinguish between what Theodosius might have wished to do as a good Christian in an ideal world, and what was practical politics for an emperor in a real world recovering from a bitter civil war. He must have known that the altar and subsidies affair had upset a number of powerful aristocrats, and the most natural explanation of the favors he showered on such grandees in 389/91 is that he was doing his best to conciliate them short of granting the one thing they really wanted. Ambrose’s heavy-handed interference may well have upset these delicate overtures. The last thing the emperor wanted to do just before he returned to the East was antagonize the still-powerful pagan lobby of Rome he had been taking such pains to win over. And any such anxieties he entertained on this score were fully justified. Within barely a year of his return another usurper was sitting on the western throne, with the elder Flavian as his praetorian prefect.

The eve of his departure for the East would have been a singularly poor moment to choose for a major anti-pagan initiative in the West. Once back in the East he would have very limited power to enforce his new policy, above all because the chief officials he was leaving in place behind him were all pagans. The February 391 law was addressed to the prefect of Rome, Rufius Albinus.¹³⁴ This has often been claimed to be “ironic,” but that is

133. *Ep. extra coll.* 11. 2 (= Maur. 52); McLynn 1994, 313–15; Liebeschuetz/Hill 2005, 263–64.

134. *Cod. Theod.* 16. 10. 10; MSS have PPO, but not only was Flavian PPO at this time; eleven other laws and four inscriptions attest him as PVR (Chastagnol 1962, 233–34).

hardly the word. Theodosius must have known that Albinus was a pagan, as was the man he himself had appointed to the prefecture of Italy, the elder Flavian. If he was planning a serious onslaught on pagan cults in the West, the worst possible way to launch it would have been to address the first law to a pagan and then return to the East. Even if he thought Albinus honorable enough to publish the law and punish any infractions that came to his notice, he must have realized that he could not count on the sort of energetic, single-minded enforcement he got from pious eastern ministers like Cynegius and Rufinus. Under the circumstances, we are bound to reconsider the assumption that the 391 law was either intended or (more important) perceived as a deathblow to paganism, rigorously enforced, provoking widespread resentment and resistance.

Its main provision was a ban on animal sacrifice. From the sons of Constantine (if not Constantine himself) on, edict after edict was issued forbidding sacrifice. The fact that such bans continued down into the sixth century has often been taken to prove that they were ineffective and that sacrifice continued regardless.¹³⁵ According to an influential article by Kenneth Harl, “The edicts of Theodosius abolished neither sacrifices nor pagans.” Pagans certainly not, but sacrifice perhaps. According to Harl, animal sacrifice “had always been central to pagan worship, and... gained new emphasis in the fourth century as the Roman monarchy embraced the new faith and moved steadily against the cults.” Others too have assumed that sacrifice continued to thrive down into the 380s.¹³⁶ This is a claim based, not on evidence, but on a priori assumption (so long as there were pagans, sacrifice must have continued).¹³⁷

But an important article by Bradbury has shown that, in major eastern cities like Antioch at any rate, public sacrifice had virtually disappeared from civic festivals even before Julian, in part because of imperial legislation, but also because of changes in the public funding available for the purpose, such as it was now transferred to circus and theatre entertainments.¹³⁸ Notoriously, Julian sacrificed beasts by the hundred, but this was considered excessive even by admirers like Ammianus and Libanius.¹³⁹ “Do the people of Ilium still sacrifice?” wrote Julian himself to Pegasius, the future apostate bishop of Ilium. Eunapius describes how the prefect Anatolius “boldly” sacrificed at Athens in 359.¹⁴⁰ According to Libanius, writing about the festival of the Kalends: “the altars of the gods do not receive today everything they once did, *since the law forbids it*, but *before the ban* the beginning of this month [January] saw many fires, much blood, much smoke wafting up to the skies.”¹⁴¹ Theodosius, he claimed in a speech of 386, did

135. See especially Trombley I (1993), Ch. 1.

136. So recently N. Belayche, in Georgoudi, Koch Piettre, and Schmidt 2005, 343–70; Fowden, *CAH* xiii (1998), 551.

137. “pagans could not properly revere and commune with the divine without sacrifices,” Harl 1990, 7–27 at 7.

138. Bradbury 1995, 331–56.

139. *Amm.* 22. 12. 6–7; *Lib. Or.* 12. 80; 18. 170.

140. *Julian Ep.* 79; *Eunap.* VS 10. 6. 8.

141. *Or.* ix. 18 (unfortunately undatable), with J. Martin’s introduction in the Budé Libanius vol. 2 (1988), 187–91.

not “banish from the temples and altars either fire or incense or the offerings of other perfumes.”¹⁴² Put together, these texts clearly imply that by Libanius’s day public sacrifice no longer took place, at any rate in Antioch. What could be more revealing than Julian’s own account of how he arrived at the Antiochene suburb of Daphne expecting extravagant sacrifices, only to find not a single beast waiting for him.¹⁴³ Not one? If this is true, it would seem that the infrastructure for producing sacrificial animals no longer existed. In earlier times they were presumably selected and prepared months in advance for the appropriate festival occasions. Beasts that fitted the often very precise requirements could not be produced out of thin air on a few days’ notice.

It might be argued that sacrifice lasted longer in the West, given the role of the aristocracy in the state cults. Yet in sharp contrast to the eastern texts just cited, there is not a single piece of direct evidence either way—surely a significant silence. In 386 Libanius claimed that sacrifice (*to thuein*) had not yet been forbidden in Rome and Alexandria.¹⁴⁴ But it is not clear that his language necessarily implies actual blood sacrifice. Just as *sacrificare* can be used for offerings of cakes, wine, or incense,¹⁴⁵ *thuein* too can be applied equally to bloody and bloodless sacrifices.¹⁴⁶ Nor can we be sure that he was either well informed or up to date, still less that he was referring to public celebrations of civic cult. The last documented and dated example of public sacrifice at Rome is Ammianus’s reference to Tertullus “sacrificing in the temple of Castor and Pollux at Ostia” in his capacity as prefect of Rome in 359, presumably “the ludi of the Castors at Ostia” dated to 27 January by Polemius Silvius, an official celebration paid for out of public funds.¹⁴⁷ Symmachus refers to sacrifices being performed at Spoleto ca. 378, but adds that they were not made “in the public name.”¹⁴⁸ It may be that Libanius had heard of the *taurobolia* celebrated in the Phrygianum (two in 377, one in 383, and the last known in 390), but that was in private. In Rome the authorities (the city prefect, usually a fellow aristocrat) may have been prepared to turn a blind eye to what their peers did in private.

But by the 380s the public sacrifices that had traditionally accompanied public festivals of the state cults would have outraged the now substantial Christian population of Rome. After all, in addition to the actual sacrifice there was the butchering and distribution of the meat for the massive banquets that followed. As early as St. Paul Christians had wrestled with the problem of avoiding sacrificial meat. Yet we hear nothing of protests about it in fourth-century Rome, nothing more than trite clichés

142. Lib. *Or.* xxx. 8, trans. A. F. Norman (slightly rearranged).

143. Jul. *Misop.* 361d–362b.

144. Lib. *Or.* xxx. 33 and 35.

145. Many examples in Scheid 2005, Ch. 1 (*sacrificium deae Diae ture vino fecerunt*); Scheid 1998, no. 69, 31; and so forth.

146. Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992, 32–33; Bauer-Danker, *Greek-English Lex. of the New Test.*³ s.v. θύω 1; Christians and pagans alike regularly use θύω and θυσία metaphorically (much material in Petropoulou 2008).

147. Amm. xix. 10. 5; Stern 1953, 84–85; Chastagnol 1960, 139; Meiggs 1973, 343–45.

148. *sacrificiis... saepe repetitis necdum publico nomine Spoletinum piatur ostentum*, Ep. 1. 49.

about showers of blood in Prudentius and the *Carmen contra paganos*. Writing in 393 Ambrose characterizes the confiscated subsidies as “funds for sacrifice” (*sumptus sacrificiorum*), but there is only one reference to sacrifice in his two letters responding to Symmachus during the famous “debate.” Taken out of context, his remark that pagans “celebrate their sacrifices everywhere”¹⁴⁹ might seem proof enough, but in context his point is that, since pagans are able to sacrifice anywhere they want (in 384 it had not yet been banned), why do they need to sacrifice in the senate house where there are now lots of Christian senators? The offering he then describes is clearly the burning of incense, not animal sacrifice.¹⁵⁰

In the complete absence of evidence nothing can be proved, but I suspect that, in the West as in the East, by the 380s (if not earlier) public rituals no longer routinely included animal sacrifice. As early as 333/5 we find Constantine laying down that celebrations of the imperial cult at Hispellum should not be “defiled by the deceits of any contagious superstition” (*ILS 705*).¹⁵¹ He must have known that rituals of the imperial cult would not be Christian. He was not forbidding pagan rituals, just animal sacrifice, the one ritual Christians found absolutely unacceptable.¹⁵² Here as early as the 330s we have at least one pagan festival in Italy where no blood was spilled. And since we find a Christian *flamen* of the imperial cult in North Africa datable between 364 and 366,¹⁵³ it looks as if sacrifice had been discontinued there too as early as the 360s.

Preaching in 404, Augustine contrasts his Christian congregation with their pagan parents; then (the 370s–380s) the temples were full of people offering incense, now the churches are full of people praising god.¹⁵⁴ Parents spattered with sacrificial blood would have made the point far more dramatically, but Augustine knew (I suggest) that his listeners’ parents had long since given up sacrifice. Imperial bans of animal sacrifice were probably not so unsuccessful as often assumed. In major cities, at any rate, sacrifice may have been dropped from public festivals from as early as the 370s. As long as there was no public sacrifice, down to the 390s Christian governments were sensible enough not to be too concerned about what people thought, said, or did in private.

Laws forbidding sacrifice continue to be issued well down into the fifth century, and have always been assumed to prove that sacrifice continued. No doubt it did here and there, especially in remote areas. But it would be unwise to infer that every such law was provoked by a documented report of sacrifice, especially in cities. As we shall see in more detail in the Conclusion paganism lasted much longer for Christians than pagans. And for Christians, paganism always implied sacrifice.

149. *Ep.* 57. 2; *Ep.* 73. 31 (*sacrificia sua ubique concelebrant*).

150. Sacrifice could consist of offerings of incense, cakes, fruit, meal, wine: Beard, North, Price II (1998), Ch. 6. 4; Scheid 2005.

151. *ILS 705*. 46–47; Cecconi 87–96; Lee 2000, 92–93; van Dam 2007, 53–57, 115–17, 363–67.

152. Oddly disputed by van Dam 2007, 32–33.

153. See the texts analysed in Chastagnol 1978, 44–48.

154. *Sermo* Dolbeau 21. 16; Dolbeau 1996, 285.

As already remarked, things changed dramatically with the eastern law of 392, forbidding pagan cult in every form. But the western law of 391 simply repeated the ban on sacrifice (perhaps provoked by complaints about the *taurobolium* of 390 in the Phrygianum, not public but not entirely private either). As for the ban on entering temples, most rituals took place outside the temples themselves. The watching public would never enter a temple. Most pagans may have felt that they had made substantial concessions and were now conforming to the law.

That the 391 law was not construed as a dramatic shift in policy is in effect implied by the evidence of none other than Ambrose himself, who carefully enumerates three successive senatorial embassies petitioning for the restoration of state subsidies for the Roman cults *after* February 391: one to Valentinian II (May 392) and two to Eugenius (later in 392 and in 393/4). In the first case he writes of “the privileges of the temples” and of the others he twice uses the phrase *reddere templis*, “restore to the temples,” presumably with *sumptus*, “expenses,” understood (his biographer Paulinus twice uses the phrase *sumptus caerimoniarum* of these embassies). With this use of *reddere*, compare *De ob. Val.* 19: “everyone present, Christians no less than pagans, said that [these things] should be restored [*reddenda*].”¹⁵⁵ It seems clear that what Ambrose had in mind was the request Symmachus had made in 382 and 384.

Yet on the traditional interpretation, while Gratian had merely withdrawn public subsidies from the Roman cults, Theodosius altogether forbade them. If this is really how Roman pagans of the early 390s perceived Theodosius’s legislation, if it was really this that drove them to open revolt, why is it that they continued again and again to petition for the restoration of the subsidies? Had not the issue of state subsidies been rendered irrelevant overnight by the absolute ban of 391, rigorously enforced? Surely what these embassies should have been asking for now is the lifting of Theodosius’s ban. Yet there is no hint of this in Ambrose’s account of the three successive senatorial embassies after 391. He writes as though they had the same goals as the pre-391 embassies.

It might seem self-evident that imperial laws, precisely dated original documents emanating directly from court, should form the bedrock of any attempt to trace the religious policies of Theodosius. Yet a fascinating article by Malcolm Errington has shown that contemporaries apparently did not take his legislation on religion quite as literally and seriously as most modern scholars.¹⁵⁶ The basis of this disconcerting claim is a close study of the treatment of Theodosius’s attitude to pagans and heretics in the four ecclesiastical historians who cover the period: Rufinus, who wrote (in Latin) in 402/3; and Socrates, Theodoret, and Sozomen, who wrote (in Greek) one after another in the 440s.

It is important to be clear that this is not just an argument from silence. Errington rightly conceded that the failure of (say) Ambrose and Augustine¹⁵⁷ to single out

155. Ambr. *Ep.* 57. 5–6; Paulin. *Vita Ambr.* 26; Ambr. *De ob. Val.* 19: *et cum universi qui aderant Christiani pariter atque gentiles dicerent esse reddenda.*

156. Errington 1997, 398–443, to which I am much indebted; see too Errington 2006, Ch. 8.

157. At *CD* v. 26 Augustine refers to Theodosius’s *iustissimis et misericordissimis legibus adversus impios*, but the context is the battle against Arianism.

Theodosius's legislative activity as a key part of his fight against paganism is not necessarily significant. It was enough for both their purposes to emphasize the emperor's personal piety and the success of his fight. But ecclesiastical historians are a different matter. Their goal was to trace the course of the (orthodox) church's victory over all rivals. Not only this. The three Greek historians all wrote after the publication of the Theodosian Code in 438; Sozomen was a lawyer and undoubtedly knew Latin, as also did Socrates. All four were working in the tradition of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* (books 1–9 of Rufinus are actually an abridged translation of Eusebius). The most original feature of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, the reason it will always remain an indispensable foundation for the history of the church, is that it incorporates some 250 original documents, quoted in full, and another 100 summarized at length.¹⁵⁸ The three Greek writers likewise included a large number of original documents, letters of bishops, synods, and emperors, especially Constantine and Constantius II (Rufinus rather fewer, in keeping with the smaller compass of his work). Yet they virtually ignore the almost two hundred laws included in Bk 16 of the Theodosian Code.

According to Socrates (e.g.), Theodosius persecuted no heretics except Eunomius, whom he exiled. "Of the others, he interfered with none of them and forced nobody into communion with himself; but he allowed them all to assemble in their own places and entertain their own opinions on points of Christian faith." According to Rufinus too, writing of Theodosius's efforts to "drive out heretics" after his return to the East in 391, "he exercised such moderation in doing so that, rejecting all motives of revenge, he took measures to restore the churches to the Catholics only insofar as the true faith could make progress once the obstacle to its being preached had been removed."¹⁵⁹ The modern historian, familiar with the nineteen ferocious laws of Theodosius proclaiming that all "vicious doctrines hateful to god and man" are "forbidden by both divine and imperial laws and shall forever cease,"¹⁶⁰ can only register astonishment at such a verdict. Even if we allow that Socrates and Rufinus simply did not know about these laws (hardly conceivable in the case of Sozomen, given their recent publication in the code, his knowledge of Latin, and the fact that he was a lawyer), if they were treated as seriously at the time as they have been by modern critics, contemporaries must have been aware of their effect. Yet it seems clear that the other sources Socrates and Rufinus consulted, whether written or oral, cannot have conveyed the atmosphere of intolerance and persecution the laws suggest.

Here we may compare Sozomen's assessment of Theodosius's legislation against heretics:¹⁶¹

By issuing legislation the emperor forbade the heterodox to meet in churches and teach about the faith and appoint bishops.... And he prescribed severe

158. For a useful brief account, Lawlor and Oulton 1928, 19–27.

159. Socr. *HE* v. 20. 4–5; Ruf. *HE* xi. 19.

160. *Cod. Theod.* xvi. 5; quotations from 5. 12 and 5. 5.

161. Soz. *HE* vii. 12. 12.

penalties in the laws. *But he did not impose them*, for he was anxious not to punish but to frighten his subjects, so that they would come to agree with him in religious matters. For this reason he also praised those who converted voluntarily.

None of the three explicitly applies the principle of frightening rather than punishing to anti-pagan legislation, but it is intrinsically probable that, like earlier Christian emperors, Theodosius did in fact follow the same policy in this area too. Bishops and evangelists might clamour for fierce laws and stringent penalties, but experienced administrators knew that this was not an effective way to change people's hearts and minds.

Here is Gregory of Nazianzus, in his *Invective against Julian*, probably early in 363:¹⁶²

Have the Christians ever inflicted on your people anything similar to what you have so often inflicted on us? *Have we taken away any of your freedom of speech* (parrhesia)? Have we incited any raging crowds against you, or magistrates willing to exceed their instructions? Whose lives have we put in danger? Rather, *whom have we deprived of holding office and other honors due to members of the elite?* In a word, to whom have we done anything like the many acts and threats you made against us?

And here is John Chrysostom, writing at Antioch in 378/9, addressing pagans:¹⁶³

No one has ever made war on them. Nor are Christians allowed to use force or violence to combat error. They must provide for the salvation of men by persuasion, speech and gentleness. *That is why no Christian emperor could ever issue decrees against you* such as the devil-worshippers issued against us.

He goes on to explain that the error of pagan superstition spontaneously collapsed on its own. Here is Gregory again, in his autobiography, writing perhaps in the early 380s:¹⁶⁴

I do not consider it good practice to coerce people instead of persuading them. Persuasion has more weight with me, and indeed with those very people I direct toward God. Whatever is done against one's will, under the threat of force, is like an arrow artificially tied back, or a river damned in on every side of its channel. Given the opportunity it rejects the restraining force. What is done willingly, on the other hand, is steadfast for all time. It is made fast by the

162. Or. iv. 98; J. Bernardi, *Gregoire de Nazianze, Discours 4-5* (Paris 1983), 244-46.

163. In *Babylam 13*: PG 50. 537 = M. A. Schatkin, C. Blanc, and B. Grillet, *Jean Chrysostome Discours sur Babylas* (Paris 1990), 106-8.

164. *Carm. II. 1. 11.* 1292-1304; A. Tuilier, G. Bady and J. Bernardi, *Saint Grégoire de Nazianze: Oeuvres poétiques* tome 1 (Paris 2004), 178 date the poem, improbably, as late as 388.

unbreakable bonds of love. The emperor [Theodosius], it seems to me, keeps this in mind, and to this extent keeps fear within bounds, winning over everybody gently, and setting up voluntary action as the unwritten law of persuasion.

A recent commentator was surprised by the tone of this passage, judging that it depreciated Theodosius's well-known efforts to promote the orthodox cause.¹⁶⁵ All three texts are no doubt to some extent disingenuous, and all three antedate the anti-pagan legislation of 391–92. But they postdate several surviving laws banning sacrifice in the strongest possible terms. It is hard to believe that Gregory and Chrysostom were making a claim they knew to be absolutely false. Surprising though it might seem, it looks as if they did not take all those ferocious denunciations so literally as most modern scholars. Or perhaps they recognized that the goal of the laws was first and foremost to stop sacrifice rather than win hearts and minds (that would come later). Gregory's emphasis on the importance of persuasion rather than force also appears in Prudentius, writing ca. 394 of conversions after the Frigidus (quoted on p. 121), claiming that none of the converts were intimidated by force: "all are convinced by reason alone and follow their own judgment, not a command." Augustine refers to the law closing the temples of Carthage in 399 as being *contra paganos*, and then adds "or rather *for* the pagans, if they had any sense" (*immo pro paganis, si sapiant*).¹⁶⁶

As far as Roman paganism is concerned, particularly instructive is Socrates's claim that "the emperor Theodosius during his short stay in Italy conferred the greatest benefit on the city of Rome."¹⁶⁷ This was the period when, on the standard view, he proclaimed "paganism's death sentence." But what Socrates reports is his measures to eliminate two "infamous abuses": kidnapping visitors to work in bake-houses and serve as prostitutes; and condemning women caught in adultery to work in brothels. Not a word about laws banning paganism.

No less instructive are the summaries of Theodosius's laws and policies about paganism in Rufinus and Sozomen. First Rufinus, whose *Ecclesiastical History* appeared in 402–3, only twelve years after Theodosius's supposedly so crucial law of February 391. Yet all Rufinus says is the following: "the cult of idols, which on the initiative of Constantine and thereafter had begun to be neglected and destroyed, collapsed in Theodosius's reign."¹⁶⁸ Remarkably enough, he does not credit the emperor with any specific initiative to bring about this end. Sozomen's summary is a bit more detailed:¹⁶⁹

165. See the note in Tuiler et al. (n. 164) 182.

166. Aug. *Sermo* 62. 18.

167. Soc. *HE* v. 18.

168. *idolorum cultus, qui Constantini institutione et deinceps neglegi et destrui coeptus fuerat, eodem [= Theodosius] imperante conlapsus est* (*HE* xi. 19); Errington 1997, 402.

169. Soz. *HE* vii. 20. 1–2; Errington 1997, 429–30.

For when the emperor saw that the habit of past times still attracted his subjects to their ancestral forms of worship and to the places they revered, at the beginning of his reign [379] he stopped them entering and at the end destroyed many of them. As a result of not having houses of prayer, in the course of time they accustomed themselves to attend the churches; for it was not without danger to offer pagan sacrifice even in secret, since a law was issued fixing the punishment of death and loss of property for those who dared to do this.

But it is surprisingly ill informed, especially from a lawyer. The first known Theodosian law to prohibit access to temples dates from 391, not 379, and no surviving law orders the destruction of temples.¹⁷⁰ Sozomen is probably generalizing here from Rufinus's account of the destruction of the Serapeum, supposedly authorized by an otherwise unknown imperial rescript. Punishment by loss of property is prescribed in the November 392 eastern law. The decisive factor in the eventual conversion of pagans, Sozomen concluded, was the closure of the temples. Augustine praises Theodosius for "commanding that the statues of the pagans should be everywhere overthrown,"¹⁷¹ but no such law survives. On the contrary, a number of laws forbid the destruction or spoliation of temples. Not one of the ecclesiastical historians portrays Theodosius as the emperor who finally forbade paganism by law.

What now of the claim—hitherto taken for granted—that Theodosius's anti-pagan laws were rigorously enforced. This is a question that has received surprisingly little attention, apart from the simplistic assumption that pagan officials were unlikely to enforce anti-pagan laws. That may well have been so, but it is important to add that it was no part of the responsibility of *any* official to enforce the law in the way that modern states enforce the law.¹⁷² The virtual absence of a regular police force to which infractions might be reported and who would then take action is one obvious problem. That was up to private individuals, who were expected to produce the necessary evidence and witnesses. If they failed to prove their case, such private would-be enforcers of the law were liable to be prosecuted, in turn, themselves. Bands of monks could attack shrines in rural areas with relative impunity, but those who presided over the cults of Rome were members of the landowning aristocracy (Ch. 4), and it cannot have been easy to find witnesses willing to impeach their own landlords in court.

It may be useful to underline why Gratian's more modest measures were effective in a way that no direct anti-pagan legislation could ever have been. Bans require not only the provision of penalties for infractions—and realistic penalties imposed for every infraction—but constant policing. The effectiveness of any ban depends on how energetically it is enforced and how easy it is to avoid detection. Gratian did not

170. Theodoret's claim that Theodosius "issued laws ordering the dissolution of the shrines of the idols" (*HE* v. 21. 1) is therefore also false.

171. *simulacra gentilium ubique evertenda praecepit*, Aug. *CD* v. 26. 48.

172. Briefly, J. Harries 1999, 93–96.

ban any activities. He simply ordered the confiscation of the revenues of certain estates that had till then financed the state cults and supported the Vestal Virgins. These were not measures that could be ignored. Once the revenues had been reassigned to other purposes, they were simply not available for their traditional ends. Whence those endless senatorial embassies trying to get them reinstated.

In what circumstances are laws most likely to be obeyed? Even rigorous enforcement is seldom in itself sufficient (and may be self-defeating) if the laws are unpopular and the practices they forbid commonplace. To take the most infamous example in modern times, the U.S. law forbidding the manufacture, sale, and consumption of alcohol was doomed to failure from the start. Laws forbidding adultery, homosexual practices, and abortion are hard to enforce and generally ineffective. Many people believe that the so-called “war on drugs” is likewise bound to fail because there are simply too many people willing and able to buy drugs. A more revealing modern analogy is the recent ban on smoking in public buildings and restaurants in the United States and many European countries.¹⁷³ The reason this ban has been as successful as it has is, first, because nonsmokers are now in an aggressive (not to say self-righteous) majority in these societies; and second, because it is limited to public places and makes no attempt to ban smoking itself. Drastic measures against paganism were bound to fail so long as pagans represented, at first a majority, and, until the late fourth century, a substantial minority of the population of the empire. On any hypothesis, the best that could be achieved was the prevention of public practices. If Theodosius’s laws banning public cult celebrations were more successful than previous laws, this is mainly (I suggest) because there were fewer pagans by the 390s.

The idea that Theodosius’s anti-pagan laws were fiercely enforced is an inference back from the baseless conviction that it was the resentment they fostered that led to a pagan reaction, the rebellion of Eugenius. There is no reason to doubt that the reign of Theodosius was a tipping point in the conversion of the Roman world, but not (or not primarily) because of his anti-pagan legislation. As far as the West at any rate is concerned, it may be that Rufinus’s seemingly naive conclusion really does reflect what most early fifth-century lay Christians were content to believe: “in Theodosius’s reign the cult of idols...collapsed.” Prudentius said much the same, praising Theodosius for closing the temples (p. 348).

There is a particularly intriguing witness to this attitude in a sermon of Augustine delivered in Carthage in 401: “if the Roman gods have abandoned Rome, why do they still exist here?”¹⁷⁴ Nor is this just a personal reflection of Augustine. In the preceding paragraph he represents his congregation shouting “Like Rome, like Carthage.” Given the date, the allusion must be to the recent closing of pagan temples and removal of cult statues in Carthage by the counts Gaudentius and Iovius. So a chronicle at this

173. I am here developing a remark by Wolf Liebeschuetz at a symposium in the Monastery of Bose in October 2008.

174. *si ergo, inquam, dii romani Romae defecerunt, hic quare remanserunt, Sermo 24. 6* (CCL 41 [1961], 332).

point being maintained in Carthage (*templa gentilium demolita sunt Ioviano et Gaudentio comitibus*, under 399).¹⁷⁵ In view of the context (the closing of temples), Augustine cannot have been thinking of the Frigidus, fought far from Rome, but of the now closed temples of the city of Rome.

When Rufinus, Prudentius, and Augustine made such claims, they did not (of course) believe there were no pagans left in Rome. But with sacrifice gone and the temples closed, *public* paganism was dead. Rufinus's *idolorum cultus . . . conlapsus est* (xi. 19) refers not to the victory at the Frigidus (xi. 3 2–33) but to his much longer and more detailed account (xi. 22–30, almost a third of his final book) of the defeat of paganism in Alexandria, symbolized in the destruction of the Serapeum, a defeat that Rufinus clearly treats as a “paradigm”¹⁷⁶ for the final defeat of paganism in the Roman world.

No Christian wanted to believe that Christianity had to be established in the Roman world by force. Rather it was part of the divine plan. Had not God long ago engineered the birth of Christ to coincide with the arrival of the *pax Augusta* so that Christianity could more easily spread throughout the empire (the *praeparatio evangelica*)? The conversion of Constantine marked the beginning of the final stage, but the fact that Constantine himself, Constantius II, and Valens had all slipped into heresy left the final establishment of an orthodox Christian empire to Theodosius. Yet Theodosius did not achieve this by issuing laws or winning battles.¹⁷⁷ As we shall see in the next chapter, Rufinus's detailed account of the Frigidus ascribes victory to Theodosius's piety and prayers.

5: EUGENIUS AND THE STATE CULTS

We come at last to the “last pagan stand.” All modern accounts of Eugenius's usurpation assume that he was pro-pagan from the start and, though himself a (lukewarm) Christian, eventually allowed his reign to take on the character of a pagan revolt.¹⁷⁸ According to Straub, the very beard he is shown with on his coins marks him as a philosopher and so tolerant of pagans, an argument still taken seriously in several recent studies.¹⁷⁹ But he had been a teacher of rhetoric, not philosophy, and Christ, the apostles, and the saints are all shown in the style of the philosopher with a beard.¹⁸⁰ So are Honorius, Theodosius II, and even Ambrose.

175. *Cons. Const.* s.a. 399; Burgess 1993, 203, 243. The Gallic Chronicle of 452 generalizes this entry to *toto orbe Romano antiquae superstitionis templa destructa* (*Chron. Min.* i. 650).

176. So Hahn 2008, 345.

177. While acknowledging the piety of both Valentinian I (xi. 10) and Gratian (xi. 13), Rufinus no doubt thought that both reigned too short a time to fulfil this role. More important, perhaps, was the passage of another two decades.

178. So most notably J. Straub's entry “Eugenius” in *RAC*; for a sensible corrective (though not going far enough), Szidat 1979; most extreme recent example, Hedrick 2000.

179. Straub, *RAC* 6. 860–61; Grierson and Mays 1992, 74; Leppin 2003, 206; Demandt 2007, 166.

180. Zanker 1995, 290.

Once we eliminate the *Carmen contra paganos* (CCP) from the debate, we are left with just four pieces of evidence: (1) his selection for the throne by the supposedly pagan Arbogast; (2) his appointment of Nicomachus Flavianus, supposedly a pagan fanatic, as his praetorian prefect; (3) Christian representations of the battle between Theodosius and Eugenius as a confrontation between paganism and Christianity; and (4) most important, his supposed restoration of the subsidies to the pagan cults. We shall see that the evidence for Arbogast's paganism is much weaker than hitherto assumed; in any case, there is a world of difference between simply being a pagan and leading a pagan revolt. As for Flavian, not only is there no solid evidence that he was a pagan fanatic (much more on this later); we must not forget that it was the pious Theodosius who first appointed him praetorian prefect. Eugenius merely invited him to continue in office, perhaps hoping that this would reassure Theodosius about his intentions. The question of Christian representations of the Frigidus will be dealt with at length in the following chapter.

That leaves the key assumption, hitherto taken as established and uncontroversial fact: that Eugenius restored the subsidies to the state cults. It is in fact far from clear that he did anything of the sort. The only evidence is a vague and ambiguous letter Ambrose wrote (or claims to have written) to Eugenius himself,¹⁸¹ and a more explicit statement in Paulinus's *Life of Ambrose* based on this letter. The fact that Paulinus is more explicit than what is undoubtedly his source has not aroused the suspicion it should have. The letter itself contrives to *imply* that Eugenius restored the subsidies while carefully stopping short of actually saying so. But if Eugenius really did what Gratian, Maximus, Valentinian II, and Theodosius had all steadfastly refused to do, why the vagueness and ambiguity? Why not condemn his action directly and explicitly? In view of the importance of this letter for the hypothesis of a pagan revival, it deserves a much more careful and detailed examination than it has so far received.

The letter purports to be a belated response to (at least) two letters from Eugenius that Ambrose claims to have deliberately left unanswered. It professes to explain both why he did not reply to these earlier letters and why he left Milan before Eugenius moved his court there in spring 393. If Eugenius really did restore the subsidies, that *could* explain why Ambrose left Milan,¹⁸² though given his record we might have expected him to remain and continue the battle against paganism. What it does *not* explain is why he refused to answer Eugenius's letters.

Ambrose claims that he refused because he "foresaw what would happen."¹⁸³ But how can this be? How can he have taken so provocative a step simply on the basis of a feeling that Eugenius would one day restore the subsidies? Some have argued that Eugenius was known to be well disposed to pagans before his accession. But he must have reassured the Christian community by refusing, as Ambrose himself concedes in

181. *Ep. extra coll.* 10 2–6; Zelzer 1982, 205–8.

182. "My reason for leaving Milan was my fear of the Lord," the letter begins.

183. *Ideo etiam in primordiis imperii tui scribenti non rescripsi, quia istud praevidebam futurum* (§ 11).

this very letter that he did, not one but two separate senatorial embassies petitioning for the restoration of the subsidies. Why should Ambrose have continued to fear the worst after so apparently convincing a demonstration?

The real explanation for his refusal to meet Eugenius is not in doubt. Like Symmachus, so long as Theodosius refused to recognize the new regime, Ambrose was anxious to keep his distance. Symmachus could do this by refusing office, remaining in Rome or one of his villas, and maintaining a low profile. But as bishop of an imperial capital, Ambrose was more exposed. If he remained in Milan he could hardly avoid meeting an emperor now resident in that city. Indeed, Ambrose and Symmachus shared a very particular reason for keeping their distance: both had been burned during the usurpation of Maximus. Like Eugenius, Maximus too had eventually invaded Italy and set up court in Milan, and Symmachus had been unwise enough to attend his consular inauguration there in January 388 and deliver a panegyric. Nothing is known of Ambrose's actions during this period (itself a significant silence), but since he did not flee the city and does not claim to have refused to meet Maximus, he must have met and offered so pious a Catholic the sacraments—and no doubt, like Symmachus, attended his consular inauguration. Theodosius evidently forgave Ambrose as he forgave Symmachus. But it would not have been prudent to risk making the same mistake twice.

Ambrose closes his letter by claiming that “for a long time I stifled and concealed my distress and determined to give no hint to anyone, but now I may no longer pretend, nor am I at liberty to be silent.” But when anxious that Valentinian II and Theodosius might give way on the issue of the subsidies, he immediately threw the whole weight of his position and eloquence into the fray, threatening the young Valentinian and infuriating Theodosius. Why did he feel that he had to conceal his anxieties about Eugenius and keep them to himself, uncharacteristic behaviour for Ambrose in any circumstances? Why not write him the same sort of stern exhortation he had sent Valentinian?

The letter at once gives the impression that Ambrose is going to accuse Eugenius of restoring the subsidies by announcing a review of the various stages in the continuing saga of the senatorial embassies.¹⁸⁴ He then details five successive embassies to court: the one to Valentinian II known from Symmachus's *Relatio* of 384; another to Theodosius in Milan in late 389; a third to Valentinian II in Gaul in May 392; and then the two Eugenius refused. But he also alludes to what modern scholars have *inferred* to be a third occasion on which Eugenius finally restored the subsidies. Since this paragraph of the letter (§ 6) is central to the argument and more allusive and problematic than generally realized, it calls for detailed analysis. Having briefly described Valentinian's refusal, Ambrose continues as follows:

But when your clemency [Eugenius] took over the helm of government, it was later discovered (*compertum est postea*) that these gifts were made (*donata illa*)

184. *ut ordinem rerum custodiam, strictim recensebo quae ad hoc spectant negotium*, § 1.

to men outstanding in public life, but practising pagans (*gentilis observantiae viris*). And it might perhaps be said (*fortasse dicatur*), august emperor, that you did not yourself restore [funds] to the temples (*templis reddideris*), but made gifts to men who had served you well (*bene meritis de te donaveris*).

A few lines later he repeats this claim in almost the same words with slightly more detail:

During your reign, envoys asked that you restore [funds] to the temples (*petierunt legati ut templis redderes*). You did not do it. Another embassy asked again. You refused. But later (*postea*) did you think it right to make gifts to those same envoys (*ipsis qui petierunt donandum putasti*)?

What are “these gifts” not further specified (*donata illa*) made to eminent pagans, and why were they only “discovered later”? Some have assumed that *donare* (repeated three times) is no more than a stylistic variation for *templis reddere*, an oblique way of saying that Eugenius yielded to a third senatorial embassy. Croke and Harries, for example, render *donandum* “that the request should be granted,”¹⁸⁵ thus unmistakably implying that Eugenius straightforwardly granted the petition of a third senatorial embassy. But both passages quoted above draw a clear distinction between *templis reddere* and *donare*. And “perhaps it might be said...that you did *not* yourself restore...*but* made gifts” implies that what Ambrose construed as *in effect* restoring the subsidies would have been characterized by Eugenius himself as nothing more than making personal gifts to individuals who happened to be pagans.

Nothing here licenses the idea of a third embassy. There were just two, both of which Eugenius refused. But it was “later” (*postea*, twice repeated) discovered (by whom?) that he had made personal gifts to members of one or both of these embassies. The personal nature of these gifts is further underlined in a later paragraph: “Who grudges your *giving* (*donavisti*) to others what you choose? We do not pry into your *generosity*, nor do we envy others their *gifts*.”¹⁸⁶ But the remainder of the letter implies, without ever making a specific accusation, that personal gifts to prominent pagans were *equivalent* to restoring the subsidies. The closest he comes is at the end of § 7: “although they persisted, was it not your duty, emperor, out of reverence for the most high, true and living God, to oppose them no less persistently, and to deny what was harmful to the holy law?” (It should be noted in passing that this sentence, like several others in the letter, unmistakably addresses Eugenius as a Christian.) Even after the Frigidus, addressing Theodosius himself, all Ambrose says, vaguely enough, is that Eugenius “involved himself in sacrilege” (*se sacrilegio miscuisset*).¹⁸⁷

185. Croke and Harries 1982, 56.

186. *Quis invidet quoniam quae voluisti aliis donavisti? non sumus scutatores vestrae liberalitatis, nec aliorum commodorum invidi*, § 8.

187. *Ep. extra coll.* 2. 2 (= Maur. 61).