

《Review Article》

Recent Research on Late-Antique Rome

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John Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital: Rome in the Fourth Century* (Oxford Classical Monographs, Clarendon Press, Oxford and New York, 2000, xx+396 pages)

Michele Renee Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire*

(Harvard University Press, Cambridge [Mass.] and New York, 2002, xiv+354 pages)

Heike Niquet, *Monumenta virtutum titulique: Senatorische Selbstdarstellung im spätantiken Rom im Spiegel der epigraphischen Denkmäler*

(Heidelberger althistorische Beiträge und epigraphische Studien 34, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 2000, iv+352 pages+8 plates)

Not since the age of Augustus had Rome changed as swiftly and profoundly as it did in the fourth century AD. This century is marked by two momentous developments. The first is the definitive withdrawal of the emperor from the city and the establishment of permanent new imperial residences outside the ancient capital. The other is the Christianisation of Rome's society and topography.

This second transformation is the subject of a subtle exploration by John Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital: Rome in the Fourth Century*, a revised version of the author's Oxford doctoral thesis. Despite the title, C. does not offer an exhaustive account of the history of Rome in the fourth century. Rather, like an inspired tour guide, he chooses a very personal selection of sites for closer inspection.

Some of the conventional must-sees, such as the pagan aristocracy of late fourth-century Rome, are missing from the itinerary. Instead, C.'s readers are shown some of the city's more closely guarded secrets, such as the monumental heritage of Maxentius' rule. Or, they are led along unfamiliar approaches to well-known sites, seen now from a fresh perspective, such as in the exploration of the significance of Constantine's construction activity in the city.

For seasoned travellers, C. opens up many new and exciting vistas. First-time visitors may

find it hard to spot all the connections between the excursions undertaken in the different chapters of his book. They too, however, will learn much from C.'s clear and subtle explanations.

C.'s book is divided into two parts. The first proceeds chronologically. It traces the Christianisation of Roman topography until 384, the year of Bishop Damasus' death. The second is structured thematically. Here C. discusses select aspects of the Christianisation of Roman society: imperial legislation against traditional religious practices, the religious significance of circus celebrations in Rome and the impact of extreme asceticism upon Christian aristocrats in Rome.

The two opening chapters chart the historical background of Constantine's momentous transformation of Rome's urban space. The first looks at the topography of Rome in the third century. C. stresses that the foundation of lavish cult spaces in the city was already an important means by which emperors constructed their legitimacy. The second chapter covers the years of Maxentius' rule (306-312). Maxentius was the first emperor to establish his residence in Rome for over a generation. Through an ambitious building programme, he inscribed his own self-conception as the only truly Roman emperor into the city's urban landscape.

In the third chapter, C. advances a new interpretation of Constantine's activity in Rome. After his defeat of Maxentius in the battle at the Milvian Bridge, the emperor founded a belt of new churches in the outskirts of the city. Richard Krautheimer famously argued that no Christian building was placed in Rome's monumental heart in order to avoid offending the still predominantly pagan aristocracy of Rome (*Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308*, Princeton 1980, pp. 3-32). However, as C. stresses, the city centre was also profoundly transformed by Constantine. Constantine's Arch, the large new bathing complex between the Trajan's Forum and the Baths of Diocletian, and the rededication of the Basilica of Maxentius in his own name were certainly intended to leave a permanent mark. As C. points out: "There is no reason to think that what was carried out here was in any sense a second choice or a compromise" (90).

According to C.'s plausible reconstruction, the building of monumental churches on the imperial property in the city's outskirts should not be read as an attempt at religious accommodation. Rather, there too, Constantine's programme mainly served to erase Maxentius' memory from the face of the city. Notably, for example, the Lateran Basilica was not built on the site of a former Christian martyr-shrine, but was placed directly over the remains of the barracks of the *equites singularii*, Maxentius' much-hated bodyguard. In this way, it served as striking symbol of Constantine's supreme imperial generosity.

In the fourth chapter, the Christianisation of Roman topography is traced until 384. The

main focus is the activities of Bishop Damasus (360-84). Damasus lastingly transformed Rome's religious landscape. Not only did he found a variety of new churches in Rome, but also, most famously, he commissioned more than sixty splendid verse inscriptions at martyr-tombs outside the city walls. According to C., the establishment of this impressive new religious landscape was not primarily an assertion of Christian power against paganism. Rather, following recent and divisive factional strife, it was a shrewd attempt to rally Rome's Christian Church behind Damasus as its new and uncontested leader. On this provocative reading, intra-Christian rivalry may have played a more important role in the Christianisation of Rome's topography than conflict with the adherents of the old religion.

With Damasus, C. concludes his chronological account of the transformation of urban space in the fourth century. In the second part of his book, the Christianisation of Rome is traced through a series of thematic explorations. In the fifth chapter, C. surveys imperial legislation on traditional cult practices from Constantine to Theodosius. C. emphasizes the discontinuities in imperial policy not only between different rulers, but also within the reign of individual emperors. Since the appearance of C.'s volume, this argument has been reinforced and extended by recent scholarship which has argued that most of the "laws" included by the compilers of the Codes were originally not intended for general application, but were case-by-case responses to specific problems.

In the sixth chapter, the religious significance of the central civic ritual in late-antique Rome is explored: circus games. It has been argued that in the Christian Roman Empire the circus became a secularised space, devoid of any religious meaning. C., by contrast, shows that the iconography and ritual of the games remained charged with religious significance. In particular, circus games were entrenched within the imperial cult. Christian emperors did not make any attempt to neutralise the religious aspect of the festivities, but continued to use them for their own ideological ends: "Until Theodosius, the lack of enthusiasm shown by Christian emperors for the suppression of the games and traditions of the Circus Maximus bears eloquent testimony to the ambivalence which was so vital to the continuity of Roman life in the fourth century" (259).

The seventh chapter explores the ways in which the asceticism displayed by some famous nobles affected the self-conception of Christian aristocrats in Rome. C. traces how initial hostility towards the ascetic virtuosos in their midst eventually gave way to complex modes of accommodation. In the early fifth century, even the most radical Christians had at their disposal strategies which allowed them, while seemingly renouncing earthly status and property, to fulfil the ideological and financial obligations of an aristocratic lifestyle. C. again shifts attention from the conflict between paganism and Christianity to the internal divisions within the

Christian community itself.

Pagan City and Christian Capital consists of a series of tours into very diverse aspects of the history of Rome in the fourth century. But even though the subject matter treated on the different outings is somewhat disparate, these excursions have an important overarching theme: the Christianisation of Rome was not a straightforward and inexorable development. Rather, C. contends, the success of Christianity depended upon a series of compromises and accommodations with the thought-world of the old religion and, above all, upon the careful management of the tensions and rifts within Christian society itself.

Of the destinations not visited by C., the most striking omission is the traditional highlight of most histories of fourth-century Rome: the city's pagan aristocracy. However, a fine study by Michele Salzman on the Christianisation of western élites, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire*, now offers an ideal complement to C.'s account of the Christianisation of Rome's urban and social space.

In contrast to C.'s sometimes bewilderingly variegated exploration, S.'s monograph is a tightly focused and firmly controlled piece of scholarship. It explores the reasons why western élites converted to Christianity. S. argues that they should be located not in imperial policy, but to a large extent in an aristocratic culture obsessed with the display of status.

This is an important argument. It is built-up through an interlocking analysis of two types of material. Based on a variety of literary and archaeological evidence, mainly from Italy, S. explores the ways in which the self-conception and lifestyles of different groups within the Roman aristocracy might have affected the process of Christianisation. These hypotheses are then tested against the data contained in a prosopographical database. This database covers 414 aristocrats who held high public offices in the Western Empire between 284 and 423 and whose religious affiliations can be determined with certainty or near certainty.

S.'s monograph is divided into seven chapters. The second and seventh are crucial. They provide the book's frame, both metaphorically and literally (the first chapter summarises previous scholarship and briefly outlines S.'s approach). In the second chapter, S. offers, based on close readings of various sources, such as Symmachus' letters or the remains of the senatorial villa at Piazza Armerina in Sicily, an outline of aristocratic culture in the Western Roman Empire. S. argues that the self-conception of late Roman aristocrats was marked by an overwhelming concern to maximise their standing in society through a sophisticated lifestyle, literary culture and the holding of prestigious public offices.

Christianity, in order to be successful, had to address these concerns. As a result,

Christianisation could never mean a sharp break with the status-based culture of the Roman aristocracy. On the contrary, the adoption of Christianity by Roman nobles significantly transformed the new religion. This is shown by S. in her seventh chapter. Traditional patterns of patronage were continued within the church; religious distinction was increasingly defined in terms of class difference; and asceticism became another way of displaying supreme aristocratic virtue: "Christianity was 'aristocratized' " (220).

These two brilliant chapters stand independently of the prosopographical database. The middle part of the book, by contrast, is based upon close readings of contemporary texts as well as upon quantitative prosopographical analysis. Highly successful too are the fifth and sixth chapters. They refute two conventional scholarly misconceptions. S. convincingly argues that the religious policies of emperors were not the dominant factor in bringing about Christianisation; and that wives did not play a substantial role in the conversion of their husbands.

In chapters three and four, S. argues that the propensity to convert among aristocrats differed according to location, social origin and career path. According to her, among imperial courtiers and among new men there were more Christians than among the ancient aristocracy; and in Italy and Africa, Christianity was less successful than in the other western provinces. This is, S. argues, because in the core lands of the senatorial aristocracy the old religion with its priesthoods and institutions was deeply entrenched in aristocratic status culture. In other regions, particularly those with strong links to the imperial courts, élites were quicker to align themselves with the emperor's religion.

On a theoretical level, this argument is convincing. However, the numerical data by which this analysis is corroborated is open to question. It is important to note that adherents of the traditional religion are more likely to be recorded in certain types of source materials than in others, and that these source materials, in turn, are concentrated among specific social groups and geographical regions.

In Italy and Africa, and among the senatorial aristocracy, a significant amount of information about the religious allegiance of aristocrats comes from inscriptions, such as the traditional priesthoods advertised on the bases of honorific statues or building inscriptions recording the construction of polytheist cult spaces. The maintenance of a very conservative epigraphic culture in these areas and amongst this social class permits the relatively easy identification of adherents of the old religion.

In Spain, Gaul and Britain, by contrast, in late antiquity honorific statues and building inscriptions were rarely erected. In these regions, for reasons largely independent of the progress of Christianity, practices of commemoration had radically changed. As a result, it is

very difficult to trace polytheists unless they are mentioned in (predominantly Christian) literary texts or honoured in the traditional way elsewhere. Hence, if there seem to be more Christians in Gaul and Spain than in Italy and Africa, and among the new élites rather than the old aristocracy, this does not necessarily reflect social reality. Rather, it may be, above all, the result of differing modes of self-representation. This does not of itself invalidate S.'s perceptive analysis of the ways in which the spread of Christianity was affected by social and cultural differences among aristocrats. But we probably have to accept that the sources do not allow her hypothesis to be tested empirically.

Of course, S.'s argument does not rest on her prosopographical database. Rather, the signal and lasting merit of S.'s lucidly written study is precisely that she has transcended the categories of prosopographical enquiry to look more broadly at the ways in which late-antique aristocrats thought about themselves and about the world in which they lived. This is an important achievement. S. has enabled us to see with unprecedented clarity the internal economy of the aristocratic society in which Christianisation took place.

Late-antique Rome was home not merely to human inhabitants. It also housed, according to the sixth-century senator Cassiodorus, another population, made of stone: "a vast populace of statues and also many flocks of equestrian monuments" (*Var.7.13 populus copiosissimus statuarum, greges etiam abundatissimi equorum*).

Amongst this other population were also many honorific statues for fourth- and fifth-century aristocrats. As has already been seen above, this ancient form of commemoration was still practised very frequently in late-antique Rome. Unfortunately, of the many monuments which once crowded aristocratic residences and public squares of the city merely a number of inscribed bases have survived.

This material forms the subject of the revised version of Heike Niquet's doctoral thesis, *Monumenta virtutum titulique: Senatorische Selbstdarstellung im spätantiken Rom im Spiegel der epigraphischen Denkmäler*. The genre is important. In the venerable tradition of German *Altertumswissenschaft*, N.'s monograph is concerned with the meticulous collection and detailed analysis of one particular, precisely delineated type of source material.

And still, this book repays attention. Through a careful analysis of the surviving inscriptions, N. enables us to see what these monuments looked like and meant in their original context. For the first time, the inscriptions of the late Roman aristocracy are not treated as a mere quarry for prosopographical information, interesting only for the data contained in them. Rather, they are here explored as part of a monument, whose significance was defined no less by ap-

pearance, material, size and location of the statue on top than by the text inscribed on the base.

N.'s monograph may conveniently be divided into three parts. The first deals mainly with monumental aspects of aristocratic statuary in late-antique Rome, such as location, appearance, size and material; the second focuses on the texts carved on their bases: nomenclature, career and praise of virtues; and the final part discusses a diverse variety of issues such as the treatment of religion in the inscriptions and the genre of aristocratic building inscriptions from late-antique Rome.

Two recurrent themes emerge from N.'s treatment. One is the remarkable homogeneity and repetitiveness of the monuments. Most of the honorific statues (as N. shows on the basis of the measurements of the bases) were of almost equal size. In appearance, they closely resembled each other: the aristocrats were represented, in the dress of the office-holder, holding the symbols of public office. The texts carved on the statue-bases all featured the traditional enumeration of the offices held by the honorand during his career, usually followed by a no less conventional praise of his civic virtues. By demonstrating the sheer uniformity of these monuments, N. points to an important facet of the self-conception of the Roman élite. She reveals something of the steadfast determination with which late Roman aristocrats attempted to maintain the unity of their class.

Some monuments, however, did not conform to the customary pattern. The careful interpretation of such monuments is the second important theme of N.'s study. For example, when in late 398 or early 399 Stilicho, at that time commander-in-chief of the army of the western empire as well as brother-in-law and guardian of the ruling emperor Honorius, was honoured by the senate, he was not given the customary life-sized statue. Rather, as N. shows on the basis of the measurements of the surviving base, he received, in all likelihood, an equestrian monument. And this monument was not placed in Trajan's Forum, the traditional location of aristocratic statuary in Rome, but in Forum Romanum, in the symbolic heart of the city's history.

To understand the significance of Stilicho's statue, its size and location are more important than the text carved on its base. Looking at the inscriptions of the late Roman aristocracy as part of a monument is the signal achievement of N.'s study. For the first time, it is possible to appreciate the differences between the homogeneous assemblage of aristocratic statuary in Trajan's Forum and a monument such as Stilicho's statue in Forum Romanum, which deliberately refused to comply with the standards of equality and conformity which otherwise marked out the self-representation of the Roman élite.

Where sometimes one might wish to disagree with N. is in the broader contextualisation of

the material. Thus, N. rightly observes that in late antiquity most statues were put up not in Rome's ancient public spaces, but in the private estates of the honorands. This shows that urban residences of Roman nobles still retained their character as, in N.'s neat term, "semi-public" spaces, displaying their owners' power and prestige to a visiting public. This observation is important.

However, it is also important to recognise that the ratio of private (or "semi-public") to public monuments significantly shifted from principate to late antiquity. As Werner Eck has shown ("Ehrungen für Personen hohen soziopolitischen Ranges im öffentlichen und privaten Bereich," in: H.-J. Schalles, H. v. Hesberg and P. Zanker (edd.), *Die römische Stadt im 2. Jahrhundert n. Chr.: der Funktionswandel des öffentlichen Raumes: Kolloquium in Xanten 2. bis 4. Mai 1990*, Bonn 1992, pp. 359-76), during the first three centuries AD the most prominent sites in the city were reserved for the monumental self-representation of emperors and their closest associates. The great majority of honorific monuments for aristocrats were now placed in the private houses of the honorands. Roman nobles were all but ousted from public space. Thus, according to Eck, 123 of 140 (88%) surviving bases can be traced to the private houses of the honorands, only 17 (12%) were put up in the public spaces of the city. This is powerful evidence of the impact upon aristocratic society of the presence of the emperor in Rome.

In late antiquity, this situation changed. On the basis of N.'s tables 45 public and 63 private inscriptions are known from late-antique Rome. (The count for public inscriptions can be raised by the addition of *CIL* VI 1725 = *ILS* 1284 and *CIL* VI 41344a missing from N.'s list.) This means that, on the basis of N.'s figures, in late antiquity there were more than three times the number of public inscriptions than in the principate (41% and 12%). This is a significant increase. It shows that Roman public space was no longer the almost exclusive preserve of imperial self-representation, but again became the site in which Roman aristocrats competitively displayed their standing in society. For sure, N. is right in stating that the private residences of Roman nobles remained important sites of self-advertisement; however, what is arguably more important is that late-antique aristocrats now also re-colonised the public spaces of Rome as a site of self-display.

By shifting our attention to the monumental aspects of the inscriptions of the Roman aristocracy, N. has raised the level of discussion on these important materials to a new level. Once, the only use to which these inscriptions could be put seemed to be to fill empty slots in the *fasti* of the office-holders of the later Roman Empire. Now, they evoke an assemblage of late Roman nobles, memorialised in stone, making tangible to any visitor of late-antique Rome the power and prestige of its aristocracy.

Between them, the three books considered in this review exemplify something of the wide

variety of approaches of current scholarship on the history of late-antique Rome. Curran offers a diverse sequence of explorations into an important historical problem: the Christianisation of Roman urban space. Salzman puts forward a focused sociological study of an equally significant topic: the conversion of western élites to Christianity. Niquet is concerned with the collection and meticulous analysis of a vital type of evidence: the inscriptions of the Roman aristocracy.

Although the three books apparently belong to very different genres: cultural history, sociological analysis and source interpretation, they cannot be fitted easily into traditional categories. They all operate on the intersection between social and cultural, religious and political history. This methodological diversity has expanded our knowledge of late antiquity in the last years in unprecedented ways.

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