

# Paganism and literature in late fourth century Rome

Autor(en): **Cameron, Alan**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique**

Band (Jahr): **23 (1977)**

PDF erstellt am: **15.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-660661>

## **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.

Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.

Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

## **Haftungsausschluss**

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

# I

ALAN CAMERON

## PAGANISM AND LITERATURE IN LATE FOURTH CENTURY ROME

The last quarter of the fourth century saw Christianity triumphant and paganism on the retreat. It also saw a resurgence of Latin literature, Christian and pagan alike. That the immense output of Christian writing was a reflection of the success and self-confidence of Christianity is plain enough. But what of the pagan writing of the age? Most of it tends to be interpreted as part of a pagan reaction. More precisely it is traditionally supposed to have been inspired by the 'circle' of Q. Aurelius Symmachus, one of the band of pagan senators who agitated for the restoration of the altar of Victory to the Senate house of Rome<sup>1</sup>.

It has long been realised that the circle of Symmachus is due for reassessment. But wider issues are involved than the existence of a literary circle. It is a concept that both presupposes and in turn has largely determined the way we look at the conflict between paganism and Christianity in late fourth century Rome. Compiling a list of its members has become a simple task, a matter of definition rather than evidence. Since the circle is

<sup>1</sup> I agree with John MATTHEWS, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A.D. 364-425* (Oxford 1975), 210 f., that the importance of this affair has been exaggerated in modern accounts of the Christianization of the Roman aristocracy.

assumed to be an association of pagan literary men, it tends to be assumed that all pagan literary men of the right time and place belonged. Those for whom there is no evidence are said to hover on what are called its 'fringes'.

I would suggest that these assumptions need to be examined very carefully. Is it helpful to study either the late Roman aristocracy or late Latin literature in terms of Christian versus pagan? Is it true that pagan aristocrats used classical literature as a weapon in their battle against the new religion? Did pagans really have a monopoly on classical and classicising literature?

In an admirable article which has (alas) done little to alter the prevailing emphasis, Peter Brown tried to get us to look at the much more interesting phenomenon of the Christianization of the aristocracy<sup>1</sup>. For by far the most striking feature of this pagan reaction about which Professors Alföldi, Straub and Chastagnol (to name only the most distinguished proponents of this line of research) have so much to tell us and contemporaries so little, is that it was so shortlived and ineffective. Within a generation of Symmachus' death there was hardly a pagan left in Rome.

Modern accounts of the late fourth century 'renaissance' always stress the pagan side. Yet it is the Christians who were most active. This overvaluation of late fourth century pagan culture was first suggested and then fostered by an undervaluation of late third century culture. It must be emphasized that the so-called 'crisis' of the third century was a crisis of the empire's *public* fortunes, with no necessary consequences for the intellectual life of the Roman aristocracy. It is certainly true that very little literature of any sort was produced in Latin during the second half of the third century, but Greek culture was still fairly healthy. And in the case of philosophy at least (to which

<sup>1</sup> *JRS* 51 (1961), 1-11 (= *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London 1972), 161-182).

we shall be returning) late fourth century Rome shows a sharp *decline* from the heights reached in the late third century.

It is this notion of the pagan culture of Symmachus and his aristocratic friends that I shall be looking at, rather than Symmachus himself and the individual members of his so-called circle. But it may be a useful warning to begin with the four obvious candidates for Symmachus' patronage, the four most prominent literary figures of the age: Ausonius, Claudian, Ammianus Marcellinus and Rutilius Namatianus. The temptation to reckon them *protégés* of Symmachus has naturally proved irresistible. The paradox is that the only one who really was a friend of Symmachus is Ausonius, the only Christian among them.

As for the three pagans, Ammianus writes very sharply of the aristocracy in general and not very tactfully of the Symmachi in particular. Above all he condemns their hostility to literature and men of letters. He presumably had patrons at Rome—but not (it would seem) among the pagan nobility<sup>1</sup>. Claudian did begin his career under the auspices of the Roman aristocracy—but its leading Christian family, the Anicii. Most of his time he spent at court in Christian Milan, where he found a highly appreciative audience for his classicizing poetry and pagan imagery. To the pagans of Rome he must have seemed irretrievably committed to the Christian camp. Of all the many people to whom he dedicated poems or with whom he corresponded on literary topics not one is known to have been a pagan and most were certainly Christian. True, it has often been claimed (or rather assumed) that the Florentinus to whom he dedicated part of his *De raptu Proserpinae* was a pagan, but the reasoning is either circular or question-begging. Florentinus—as also his literary brothers Protadius and Minervius—“must have been”

<sup>1</sup> *JRS* 54 (1964), 15-28; cf. too now R. SYME, *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* (Oxford 1968), 142 f.

a pagan because he was (a) a literary man, (b) a correspondent of Symmachus and (c) a friend of Claudian. In fact there is no reason to doubt that all three brothers were Christians, like almost all literary men from Gaul at this period <sup>1</sup>.

Symmachus' was not the only literary circle or source of patronage around. The most promising catches of the century were snapped up elsewhere.

As for Rutilius, there is nothing whatever beyond their common paganism to associate him with Symmachus. Not only is he nowhere mentioned in Symmachus' extensive correspondence or included among the interlocutors of Macrobius' *Saturnalia*; his famous little poem *De reditu suo* (of which more has recently been found) was not written till fifteen years after Symmachus' death. To count him even on the outermost fringes of Symmachus' circle nonetheless <sup>2</sup>, is surely to stretch the concept beyond the point where it has any utility.

Not even the pedestrian Rufius Festus Avienus (as we now know him to have been called), author of the third Latin translation of Aratus, an *Ora maritima*, and certainly a pagan, can be counted among Symmachus' associates. He too is absent from the correspondence (his *floruit* fell around the middle of the century), and the Avienus who features along with Symmachus among the interlocutors of Macrobius's *Saturnalia* is to be identified with the fabulist Avianus (as he has been incorrectly known since about the eleventh century) <sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> On all these points see my *Claudian. Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius* (Oxford 1970), 189 f.; 402 f.

<sup>2</sup> E. g. U. KNOCHÉ, in *Symbola Coloniensia I. Kroll ... oblata* (Köln 1949), 14: "Rutilius dem Symmachuskreis durch persönliche Freundschaft ebenso verbunden war, wie durch seine Lebensanschauungen". The new fragment was published by M. FERRARI, "Spigolature Bobbiesi", in *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 16 (1973), 15 f. (incidentally confirming the date 417 for Rutilius' voyage for which I had argued in *JRS* 57 (1967), 31-39).

<sup>3</sup> *CQ* 17 (1967), 385 f., with C.E. MURGIA, in *California Stud. in Class. Ant.* 3 (1970), 185-197.

## II

Let us take a closer look now at three specific areas where the pagan aristocracy have been thought to be particularly active—and active with a consciously pagan purpose: the “editing” of classical texts, the translating of Greek works into Latin, and historical writing.

First, the editing; though “editing” is rather too grand a word for the very modest activity involved. At the end of certain works occur what are known as *subscriptiones*, notes in the MSS stating that so and so has “emended” the text at such and such a place and time<sup>1</sup>. We have a very few originals, such as (perhaps) the signature of Turcius Rufius Apronianus Asterius, cos. 494, in the Medicean of Vergil. Most, inevitably, are copies.

Many of the names that occur in these *subscriptiones* belong to western aristocrats of the fourth and fifth centuries. As a consequence, it has been argued that these aristocrats, who are assumed without argument to have been pagans to a man, chose texts that both reflected and were intended to spread their pagan sympathies.

The most favourable example is the famous *scriptio* to the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius. In it a certain Sallustius, a pupil (as he says) of the orator Endelechius, claims to have “emended” Apuleius at Rome in 395 and again at Constantinople in 397. Now Sallustius may be the son of a friend of Symmachus, both dates fall in Symmachus’ lifetime, and Apuleius is an author Christians might be thought to have disapproved of.

So far so good. But unfortunately we also know Endelechius, a teacher of rhetoric, author of a poem *De mortibus boum*

<sup>1</sup> O. JAHN, “Über die Subscriptionen in den Handschriften römischer Classiker”, in *Berichte der Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissensch.* 1851, 327-372, admirable for its day but now badly in need of revision. In individual cases reference should of course be made to the most recent or standard critical editions. See too pp. 26-28.

—and a *Christian* <sup>1</sup>. Naturally we cannot allow a Christian to help young Sallustius disseminate so subversive an author, and it has been suggested, quite gratuitously and improbably, that it was only *after* helping Sallustius that Endelechius was converted <sup>2</sup>.

The fact that he was a professor of rhetoric proves nothing. At least one other professor of rhetoric in Rome itself at this very moment was a Christian; Magnus, a correspondent of St. Jerome who had a statue erected to him by the whole senate <sup>3</sup>. Come to that we have no evidence that Sallustius was a pagan, and the year 395, only months after the utter ruin of what was to prove the last pagan revival at the battle of the River Frigidus, would have been about as inappropriate a moment for pagan propaganda as could well be imagined. (Norman Baynes justly made the same point apropos W. Hartke's singularly misguided attempt to prove that the *Historia Augusta* was written as a pagan apology in the same year <sup>4</sup>.) Finally, it must be added that the *Metamorphoses* was widely read and evidently enjoyed by Christians; by Jerome and in particular by Augustine, who refers in a perfectly matter of fact way to Lucius' retention of his human faculties after his transformation (it is only from Augustine, incidentally, that we learn the popular name of the book, *The Golden Ass*) <sup>5</sup>. The serious-minded pagan Macrobius, by contrast, was rather shocked that a respectable philosopher like Apuleius should have written such a racy book <sup>6</sup>. The whole house of cards collapses.

<sup>1</sup> M. SCHANZ - C. HOSIUS - G. KRÜGER, *Geschichte der römischen Literatur* IV 2 (München 1920), 360-361.

<sup>2</sup> E. LOMMATSCH, "Litterarische Bewegungen in Rom im vierten und fünften Jhdt. n. Chr.", in *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Litteraturgeschichte* 15 (1904), 186 n. 8.

<sup>3</sup> H. DESSAU, *ILS* 2951; cf. Hier. *Epist.* 70 (of 397); *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* I (Cambridge 1971), 535.

<sup>4</sup> *JRS* 43 (1953), 137.

<sup>5</sup> *Civ.* XVIII 18; see in general C. MORESCHINI, "Sulla fama di Apuleio nella tarda antichità", in *Romanitas et Christianitas. Studia I. H. Waszink... oblata* (Amsterdam/London 1973), 243-248.

<sup>6</sup> *Somn.* I 2, 8.

A similarly fragile argument has been based on the text book of Arusianus Messius, a collection of phrases from Vergil, Sallust, Terence and Cicero which happens also to include a quotation from a speech by Symmachus. On the strength of this we are asked to believe that Messius "seems to have been close to Symmachus"—as though he could not have quoted an example from the greatest orator of the day without being a personal friend. But there is worse to come. Messius' book is dedicated, not to Symmachus, but to Olybrius and Probinus, two members of the great Christian family, the Anicii. Rather than abandon Messius' supposed closeness to Symmachus, we are now told that even the Christian Anicii "were interested in the literary efforts of the pagan circles"<sup>1</sup>. To such extremes is a good scholar unconsciously driven simply because he takes it for granted that *all* secular literary activity must be associated with "pagan literary circles", which means *the* pagan literary circle, that of Symmachus. In fact (of course) the four authors Messius excerpted were the most standard of school texts, read by pagans and Christians alike. Interestingly enough, the first person to quote from Messius' book, very soon after it was written, was St. Ambrose, in one of his sermons<sup>2</sup>.

It is also interesting to observe that Claudian's first poem was a panegyric on the same two Anicii in their consular year 395 (I add in passing that it was clearly because of their Christianity that they were appointed consuls the year after the battle of the Frigidus). Can we not forget about the pagan circles Claudian, Messius and others may or may not have been close to (whatever that may mean), and conclude simply that, with the discrediting of the pagan party in 394, literary men increasingly (and inevitably) sought out the patronage of Christian aristocrats instead?

<sup>1</sup> H. BLOCH, in *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the fourth century*, essays edited by A. MOMIGLIANO (Oxford 1963), 212.

<sup>2</sup> *Fug. saec.* 3, 16.



## III

Now for historiography. It is here above all that we must distinguish between facts and hypotheses. The basic facts can be stated very briefly<sup>1</sup>. No one will deny that a number of fourth century pagans interested themselves in the writing of history. Contrary to popular assumption, however, Roman aristocrats are not prominent among these historians nor are their histories characterized by any preoccupation with Christianity. The most notable development of fourth century pagan historiography is the epitome, whether of all Roman history (Eutropius, Festus) or just the Empire (Aurelius Victor). None of these works were written either by or for Roman aristocrats. All three were provincials, and Eutropius and Festus both wrote for the *eastern* court, their purpose to supply the new Christian aristocracy of office with the basic facts of Roman history. They never mention Christianity, but not out of rancour or contempt: in this respect they are simply neutral. The much fuller history of Ammianus (significantly enough a Greek), written at the end of the century, does at least break the conspiracy of silence, but without taking up a definite standpoint one way or the other. The same is true of that mysterious work of perhaps about the same period, the *Historia Augusta*.

We may contrast on the one side the revolutionary developments of fourth century Christian historiography, ecclesiastical history and the world chronicle, and on the other the bitterly anti-Christian history of the eastern pagan Eunapius of Sardis. Whatever the motives of western pagans—tolerance, tradition, prudence, fear—by supplying so inoffensively the basic facts which Christians could then equip with their own interpretation, this reticence must actually have facilitated the eventual Christianization of the pagan traditions of Rome. It would be idle to say that pagans *ought* to have developed a specifically pagan

<sup>1</sup> See the illuminating analysis by A. MOMIGLIANO, in *The Conflict . . .*, 79 f.

historiography, but by not doing so they unquestionably played into Christian hands.

So far the facts, but it would be misleading to pass on without mentioning some at least of the relevant modern hypotheses.

In the eyes of many the leading pagan historian of the age was Nicomachus Flavianus, one of Symmachus' closest friends and undeniably a militant pagan, indeed the standard bearer of the pagan party in 394. That he wrote a history, apparently called *Annales*, we know from two inscriptions; it has not survived nor is it mentioned by any extant writer. Modern scholars, however, have traced much of Ammianus, Zosimus, the *Historia Augusta*, the *Epitome de Caesaribus* and sundry other works to Flavianus, as well as propounding remarkably detailed theories about his sources, his digressions and even his style<sup>1</sup>. It was, they claim, a full-scale pagan interpretation of fourth century history—despite the fact that all we know of the work is that it was dedicated to that most Christian of emperors Theodosius I. If we are frank we must admit that we have no idea whether it was a large scale history or the briefest of epitomes (the title is no guide), nor even whether it covered the empire at all rather than the republic, much less the fourth century down to the accession of Theodosius in propagandist style.

Next, and with all due brevity, the *Historia Augusta*. It will not be necessary to recapitulate here the fragile arguments adduced in support of the view that the *HA* is (in J. Straub's words) a *historia adversus Christianos*<sup>2</sup>. That this tantalising work is in some sense a forgery of the late fourth century (though

<sup>1</sup> The most recent attempts are J. SCHLUMBERGER, *Die Epitome de Caesaribus*, Vestigia 18 (München 1974), 240 f., and F. PASCHOUD, *Cinq Etudes sur Zosime* (Paris 1975), 150 f. On chronological grounds alone Flavianus could not have been a source for Ammianus: see *JRS* 61 (1971), 261, and cf. too now T.D. BARNES, in *CPh* 71 (1976), 266.

<sup>2</sup> *JRS* 55 (1965), 240 f.

*pre*-Theodosian) <sup>1</sup> passed off as a work of the age of the Tetrarchs and Constantine I readily concede. Now on the view of the 'pagan literary resistance' here under discussion, a pseudonymous historical work of the late fourth century might indeed have been expected to be a vehicle of anti-Christian propaganda. Thus it is a more than ordinarily damaging blow to this view as a whole that the *HA* so obviously does *not* have any clear cut religious point of view.

More plausible at a very general level is P. L. Schmidt's suggestion that the *Liber prodigiorum* of Julius Obsequens, a collection of prodigies whose due observation is clearly linked to the wellbeing of the empire, is, if not a pagan counterpart to Orosius or Augustine, at any rate some sort of pagan interpretation of Roman history <sup>2</sup>. Unfortunately, however, we just do not know who Obsequens was, or when and where he wrote. Even granted Schmidt's conclusion that he drew on both Livy direct and the Oxyrhynchus *Epitome* of *ca.* 300, it still does not follow that he wrote in the pagan senatorial circles of late fourth century Rome (Symmachus cannot have been the only possessor of a complete Livy) rather than (say) Gaul or North Africa somewhat earlier in the century. And we can hardly exclude the possibility that Obsequens was in fact a religious pagan of the second or third century who wrote without reference to Christianity at all.

Then there is the recent claim of F. Paschoud that the polemical pagan history of Eunapius and its less polemical continuation by the certainly pagan Olympiodorus drew much of their anti-Christian material from an elaborate pagan interpretation of fourth century history written soon after the sack of Rome (410) *in Latin* <sup>3</sup>. Some of Paschoud's individual arguments are of

<sup>1</sup> *JRS* 55 (1965), 245 and 61 (1971), 258.

<sup>2</sup> *Iulius Obsequens und das Problem der Livius-Epitome*, Abh. der Akad. d. Wiss. Mainz, geistes- u. sozialwiss. Kl. 1968, 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Cinq Etudes sur Zosime* (Paris 1975), 147 f.

considerable interest; for example, the suggestion that Zosimus' erroneous postdating of the conversion of Constantine to 326 is not just an error but a deliberate falsification designed to discredit Constantine's motive by tracing his conversion to remorse for the execution of his son Crispus. But there is no reason to derive this pagan smear from a specific historical work (a similar version appears already in a speech of Libanius), much less one written in Latin (inferred from an oversubtle interpretation of just one passage of Zosimus). It seems to me both simpler and more plausible to attribute this hostility to Constantine (and later Theodosius) to Eunapius himself rather than to a hypothetical intermediary, whether Greek or Latin (it is in any case most improbable that a Greek sophist like Eunapius would have been either willing or able to read such a Latin history, had it existed). I should prefer to find here confirmation in detail of the generalisation expressed above that it was eastern rather than western pagans who, following the Christian example, exploited history for religious ends. As Paschoud acutely realised (though gratuitously deriving the passage from his Latin *Ignotus*), when Eunapius expresses his well known contempt for chronology and those who waste their time computing exact dates (*Fragm. Hist.* 1 and 73), it is surely the new Christian chronicle rather than the traditional annalistic history he had in mind.

It is of course true that Augustine wrote his *Civitas Dei* and Orosius his *Adversus Paganos* with the avowed aim of refuting pagan attacks on Christianity, and it has often been assumed that it was a full scale pagan historical work against which they trained their artillery. In fact, to judge from what both men actually say, there is no reason to suppose that the pagans in question did any more than the obvious, blame the sack of Rome on the anti-pagan legislation of Theodosius in quite general terms. There is nothing to suggest a written work at all, much less a history. All Augustine says is that he is "defending the glorious city of God against those who prefer their gods to its

founder" (I, *proem.*). More decisively still, Orosius claims to be attacking the *vaniloqua pravitas* of those who blame their present ills on Christianity "without a thought for the future, either forgetful or ignorant of the past" (*qui cum futura non quaerant, praeterita autem aut obliviscantur aut nesciant, Prol. 9*). If these pagan opponents can be described as "forgetful or ignorant of the past", how can we suppose that their method had been the *same* as Orosius', namely to establish their case by detailed historical analysis? I suggest that the idea of a *historical* refutation of paganism was Augustine's own contribution to the debate.

To western medievalists gifted with hindsight the *City of God* has always seemed so inevitable and fitting a conclusion to the debate that the failure of pagans to reply has never evoked comment. But Rutilius Namatianus, who certainly knew the early books<sup>1</sup>, was quite unconvinced. The greater part of the work was intended less to refute pagans than to provide disheartened Christians with an explanation of an event which was a blow to the very foundations of their Eusebian world view. Pagans could hardly be expected to understand, much less refute the complexities of Augustine's exposition. Even the anti-pagan books were less a direct rebuttal of the pagan thesis than Augustine's own deeply personal and sometimes eccentric reflections on Roman history, mostly the history of the Republic, impressive enough in their way but scarcely a decisive answer to the immediate charge against Christianity<sup>2</sup>. And the shallowness and stupidity of Orosius, an embarrassment surely even to his master Augustine, must have been easy enough meat for any intelligent and well read pagan. In the East we find Zosimus embarking on a sharply anti-Christian interpretation of Rome's decline as late as the beginning of the sixth century. In the West, however, there was apparently no one with the ability, the

<sup>1</sup> *JRS* 57 (1967), 31 f.

<sup>2</sup> R. A. MARKUS, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge 1970), 53 f.

equipment or even perhaps the energy. And if the reason for this pagan silence in the West had really (the usual though in my view quite inadequate supposition) been prudence and fear of Christian reprisal, these are hardly motives that should command our admiration. Eastern pagans were less timid and lasted longer.

#### IV

A few words now about translations from Greek—in themselves, of course, strong and suggestive evidence of cultural decline. In the second and third centuries educated men could be expected as a matter of course to read Greek books in the original. The most favourable and most quoted example for the traditional interpretation is Nicomachus Flavianus' version of Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. Apollonius had been a miracle worker, help up in some quarters as a pagan counterpart to Christ. But even here it is difficult to be sure. The *Life of Apollonius* had always been a popular book, and it was read, quite possibly in Flavian's translation, by both Jerome and Augustine, neither of whom seems to have interpreted it as an anti-Christian book <sup>1</sup>.

It might be added here that it was the Christians who adapted the biographical genre to a practical purpose, hagiography. We know that biography was popular in late Roman senatorial circles (Ammianus says that Juvenal and Marius Maximus were all they read <sup>2</sup>); it was presumably at this audience that the *HA* was aimed. But no one can seriously believe that these trivialised

<sup>1</sup> P. COURCELLE, *Late Latin Writers and their Greek Sources* (Cambridge, Mass. 1969), 189-190; that Flavianus translated the work is a not quite certain inference from Sidonius, *Epist.* VIII 3,1. On the decline of Greek, Courcelle's book remains the standard work; on translations see, on the patristic side, H. MARTI, *Übersetzer der Augustin-Zeit* (München 1974).

<sup>2</sup> XXVIII 4, 14.

imperial biographies were meant to compete with the *Lives* of Antony and the desert fathers. Here again it was Eastern pagans who in their own way exploited the Christian initiative. Eunapius' *Lives of the Sophists* gives a brief idealised biography of all the prominent Greek pagans of his age, contemporaries, not the long dead Apollonius of Tyana, a precedent continued in Marinus' *Life of Proclus* and Damascius' *Life of Isidore*. There was never anything comparable in the West. It has long been noticed that there is a series of close parallels between the prefaces of Jerome's *Life of St. Hilarion* and the *HA Life of Probus*. I hope to have proved elsewhere that it was Jerome who copied the *HA*, not vice versa<sup>1</sup>; that is to say, that it was, typically, the Christian who exploited the pagan, not the pagan the Christian.

Most of the other pagan translations of the age are very small beer indeed. Avienus' rambling verse renderings of Greek astronomical and geographical poetry such as Aratus and Dionysius Periegetes are of purely antiquarian inspiration, quite uninfluenced by contemporary issues. Then there is a sober, Sallustian version of the comical Dictys Cretensis, supposedly an eyewitness account of the Trojan war. More revealing are some colourless works on Alexander the Great, the *Epitoma Rerum Gestarum Alexandri* and the *Liber de morte Alexandri*. Their very anaemic anonymity is perhaps the most striking thing about them. For by the fourth century, the evergreen legend of Alexander, already thoroughly penetrated by romantic and novelistic elements, began to be Christianized too. Propagandist tracts appeared, anti-pagan and anti-ascetic. They were translated into a more popular Latin, with frequent vulgarisms and biblical echoes, very different from the correct, sober and basically historical *Epitoma Rerum Gestarum* and *Liber de morte*. There was plainly a tremendous vogue for the Alexander legend in the fourth and fifth century West, in pagan and Christian circles

<sup>1</sup> *JRS* 61 (1971), 258.

alike, but paradoxically—or perhaps predictably—it was the Christians, not the pagans, who captured him for their cause<sup>1</sup>.

If we turn to more specifically Christian translations then the success of the Christians becomes more apparent still. Jerome's friend Rufinus was producing version after version of Origen, Gregory Nazianzen and Basil the Great for his patron the Roman aristocrat Apronianus. Again, Christian literary patronage. Apronianus' wife Avita confessed to Rufinus that she sometimes found this sort of thing rather heavy going. The tactful (and practical) Rufinus responded with some of Origen's easier homilies, on Psalms 36-38, remarking in his preface to Apronianus that their simplicity will appeal even to the unintelligent, "so that the inspired utterance may reach not only men but also devout ladies". Soon afterwards he had an even better idea, and produced a version of the *Sentences* of Sextus, which became an instant bestseller<sup>2</sup>. His friend and later enemy Jerome complained indignantly that it was read *per multas provincias*. Jerome's objection was that Sextus had been a pagan. He was probably wrong but we need not enter into the controversy: whoever wrote the *Sentences*, Rufinus was shrewd enough to capture them definitively for a wide Christian market. Jerome himself, of course, with his translations and commentaries (and others of the fathers, notably Ambrose and Augustine) were likewise aiming at a wide public. One might also contrast the traditional aristocratic oratory and correspondence of Symmachus with the popular sermons and more practical correspondence of Ambrose and Augustine. The pagans never attempted to compete at this level.

<sup>1</sup> L. CRACCO RUGGINI, "L'Epitoma Rerum Gestarum Alexandri Magni e il Liber de Morte Testamentoque eius", in *Athenaeum* 39 (1961), 285-357; "Sulla cristianizzazione della cultura pagana: il mito greco e latino di Alessandro dall'età antonina al medioevo", in *Athenaeum* 43 (1965), 3-80 (with gratuitous evocation at p. 8 of "la cerchia dei Symmachi e dei Nicomachi").

<sup>2</sup> For all details see H. CHADWICK (ed.), *The Sentences of Sextus* (Cambridge 1959), 117 f.



## V

By common consent the real heavyweight among late Roman pagans was Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, consul designate for 385. Unlike his fellows he read Greek philosophers in the original, and translated Themistius' *Commentary on Aristotle's Analytics* and perhaps a work on the *Categories* too<sup>1</sup>. For this he has been acclaimed as a precursor of Boethius; an apt parallel, in that Boethius too mainly occupied himself with the formal and uncontroversial problems of logic. Here is a man who, if he had so chosen, might have used his talents like a Rufinus or a Jerome, to popularise the neoplatonists (say) rather than Aristotle's logic.

Praetextatus' position as leader of the pagan intelligentsia of late fourth century Rome is clearly illustrated in the *Saturnalia* of Macrobius—the prime though much misunderstood document of late Roman paganism. The realization that it was in fact written half a century later than used to be thought must involve a complete rethinking of its testimony: not a contemporary record of the literary conversations of Praetextatus and his friends, but an idealized portrayal inspired by nostalgia for what was no more<sup>2</sup>. The conflict with Ammianus' picture of the late fourth century aristocrats "locking up their libraries like the family tomb" has often enough been noticed. It is a conflict that can easily be minimised; it is safe to assume that both are exaggerating. But we can go further. Macrobius very carefully dates his gathering shortly *before* Praetextatus' death in 384, while Ammianus is writing of his experiences in Rome *after* that date. Macrobius' choice of date was prompted, I would suggest, by a conviction (probably not unjustified) that Praetextatus' death marked the end of an era. He might not have

<sup>1</sup> See the useful summary in A. CHASTAGNOL, *Les Fastes de la préfecture de Rome au Bas-Empire* (Paris 1962), 171-178.

<sup>2</sup> *JRS* 56 (1966), 25-38.

disagreed with Ammianus' estimate of the cultural pursuits of the aristocracy after then. So in so far as there was a consciously pagan literary circle in late fourth century Rome, in Macrobius' judgement at least it was a circle of Praetextatus, not a circle of Symmachus at all.

It is easy to see why the death of Praetextatus was such a blow to the pagan party. Not only was he a man of enormous authority and determination; he was their one intellectual. He was a philosopher. The importance of philosophy, or rather its absence, in the collapse of western paganism has not (I think) been fully appreciated.

It is instructive to contrast the vigorous resistance conducted by eastern pagans in the philosophical circles of Athens and Alexandria well down into the sixth century. Eastern pagans, with their Plato and Aristotle, their Porphyry and Iamblichus, had a faith that seemed at least as rational and as firmly based as Christianity. More than 150 years after the death of Praetextatus we find Simplicius arguing key points (such as the eternity of the world) with his Christian counterpart John Philoponus blow by blow according to Aristotle<sup>1</sup>.

This would have been beyond Symmachus. The Symmachi are generally reckoned to have been fairly late recruits to the Roman aristocracy. A Symmachus consul in 330, grandfather of our Symmachus, consul 391, is universally supposed to have been a new man, according to some a barbarian. One very hostile recent critic of Symmachus has argued that all the many flaws in his character are to be explained by the fact that he was still at bottom a *parvenu*<sup>2</sup>.

Yet in a *Commentary on the Isagoge of Porphyry*, the Christian neoplatonist Elias remarked that the senator to whom Porphyry dedicated the book *ca.* 270, one Chrysaorius, was a descendant of

<sup>1</sup> *PCPhS* 195 (1969), 7-29.

<sup>2</sup> F. PASCHOUD, in *Historia* 14 (1965), 228 ("un parvenu, un nouveau riche..."); cf. too his *Roma Aeterna* (Rome 1967), 73 f.

someone he calls the famous Symmachus, of whom was written the line <sup>1</sup> Σύμμαχε Συμμαχίδη, πολυσύμμαχε, σύμμαχε Ῥώμης.

Other neoplatonists preserve other details about this Chrysaorius <sup>2</sup>, all perfectly consistent and plausible, presumably all deriving from Porphyry himself. So Chrysaorius, *ca.* 270, was a "descendant" (ἀπόγονος, that is to say, something at any rate more remote than son) of a Symmachus who was himself a son of at least one other Symmachus, all of them long associated with Rome. It is difficult to believe that these third century Symmachi of Rome are wholly unconnected with the fourth century Symmachi of Rome <sup>3</sup>.

This discovery has many and varied consequences. For example, whether or not we like the consul of 391, at least we cannot call him a *parvenu*. But what is most interesting for our present concern is to find an ancestor of Symmachus in close contact with no less a pagan intellectual than the great Porphyry. In fact several of Porphyry's works are dedicated to Chrysaorius, and others to other Roman senators of the day. We know relatively little about the aristocracy of late third century Rome, and prosopographers need reminding that our best source for their social and intellectual life is Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*. Without this fascinating document how could we ever have guessed that large numbers of senators, even (or rather especially) their womenfolk, used to flock to his seminars.

For centuries Athens had been *the* philosophical centre of the Greco-Roman world. But when Plotinus set up school at Rome in 243, even the professors of Athens came to confess themselves overshadowed <sup>4</sup>. As was the custom in ancient philosophical schools, the Master's disciples were hardly students in the modern sense, but often men of mature years,

<sup>1</sup> *Comm. in Aristotelem Graeca* XVIII 1, ed. A. BUSSE (Berlin 1900), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Collected in *PLRE* I 204.

<sup>3</sup> I shall be arguing this point at greater length elsewhere.

<sup>4</sup> Porph. *Plot.* 19.

sometimes already distinguished scholars themselves; in Plotinus' case some destined to prove more influential than even himself, such as Iamblichus and Porphyry. It was in circles such as these that the Roman aristocracy of the late third century moved.

Of course there had been a tradition going back to the republic of aristocrats retaining Greek philosophers in their households as a sort of domestic chaplain. Plotinus was the spiritual director of a far wider circle than normally fell even to the most fashionable philosopher's lot. Even the empress Salonina fell under his spell. We need not believe that these debs all completed their Ph.D.s, but they could evidently both read and reason in Greek, and many did take their philosophy very seriously. Plotinus exerted a very practical influence on his disciples. One senator called Rogatianus felt impelled to resign his praetorship (the lictors were actually waiting at his front door when he made his decision). He dismissed his servants, sold his property, made do with eating alternate days and in no time was cured of the gout<sup>1</sup>. No wonder Plotinus held him up as a classic example of the value of philosophy.

The truth was important to Plotinus, as it was to his Christian successors a century later. He used to devote much time in his classes to the teachings of the various Gnostic sects—and the Christians too. He encouraged his pupils to write refutations; Amelius wrote forty books against Zostrianus<sup>2</sup>, and of course some years later Porphyry was to publish his long and carefully reasoned attack on Christianity. Not for the pagan circles of third century Rome the "conspiracy of silence" about Christianity that we have seen to be so characteristic of their successors a century later.

Let us return to the late fourth century. On the conventional view neoplatonism was strong in the circle of Symmachus. The

<sup>1</sup> *Plot.* 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Plot.* 16.

names of Macrobius (above all his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*) and of Servius, author of the famous *Vergil Commentary*, are always quoted. And rightly so, inasmuch as both were clearly familiar with neoplatonic writings<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, however, Macrobius and Servius were not and cannot have been members of the circle of Symmachus. The new date for Macrobius affects Servius too<sup>2</sup>. Both wrote some fifty years after the death of Praetextatus. They are *not* evidence for the interests and attainments of the age of Praetextatus, who, as we saw, was in any case drawn to the logic of Aristotle rather than the neoplatonists. *That* was not going to worry the Christians—or rally his own troops for that matter.

Symmachus himself seems quite innocent of any philosophical equipment. Listen to the letter he wrote commending a philosopher to Nicomachus Flavianus<sup>3</sup>:

« Both his dress and his hair proclaim that Serapammon is a man of letters, for if he had thought himself outside the circle of such things he would never have adopted a dress fitting to philosophers. But about this form your own opinion, since you profess a knowledge of such things.»

Paradoxically, or perhaps predictably, it is the *Christians* who both read and (more important) exploited Plotinus and Porphyry. This was the momentous discovery that the young Augustine made at Milan in 386. The man who actually introduced him to Plotinus may have been Mallius Theodorus (later a friend of Claudian), who after an outstanding career crowned with a praetorian prefecture retired from public life in 382 to

<sup>1</sup> P. COURCELLE, *Late Latin Writers...*, 13 f.

<sup>2</sup> *JRS* 56 (1966), 31-32; see too N. MARINONE, "Per la cronologia di Servio", in *Atti della Accademia delle Scienze di Torino* 104 (1969-70), 1-31 (though, unlike Marinone, I believe that Servius' *Commentary* was published before the *Saturnalia*).

<sup>3</sup> *Epist.* II 61; cf. too J.A. MCGEACHY Jr., *Q. Aurelius Symmachus and the Senatorial Aristocracy of the West* (Diss. Chicago 1942), 188-191.

devote himself to philosophy, *Christian* philosophy. Courcelle has shown that certain sermons of St. Ambrose that Augustine may have heard or read contain long stretches translated more or less verbatim from Plotinus<sup>1</sup>. Yet again we find the Christians adapting and assimilating what they needed from the pagans, while the pagans failed even to make use of what they had.

More instructive still, perhaps, is the lonely figure of Marius Victorinus, the most celebrated and fashionable professor of rhetoric in mid fourth century Rome, a darling of the aristocracy. In the course of his studies of Cicero's *Rhetorica* Victorinus was led to Porphyry's *Isagoge* and thence to other works of Porphyry and Plotinus, which he translated. Here at last, it must have seemed, was Porphyry's Roman successor (after Porphyry's death neoplatonism had moved back, via Iamblichus' school in Syria, to Athens). But then, late in life, Victorinus shocked Rome by announcing his conversion; the rest of his days were spent writing *Commentaries on the Pauline epistles* and an elaborate attack on Arianism<sup>2</sup> (it is significant, and typical, that, once a Christian, Victorinus should have turned his pen against heresy rather than paganism).

The only other fourth century pagan writer to show knowledge of Porphyry is the astrologer Firmicus Maternus<sup>3</sup>; after dedicating his *Mathesis* to the pagan aristocrat Lollianus Mavor-tius shortly before the death of Constantine, he too was converted, and wrote an attack on paganism.

Another significant late fourth century neoplatonist is Calcidius, author of a translation of Plato's *Timaeus* and a commentary thereon. Significant, because though it is a purely academic piece of work, there are numerous incidental indications

<sup>1</sup> *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris 1968), 106 f., in *REL* 34 (1956), 220-239; and P. HADOT, *ibid.*, 202-220.

<sup>2</sup> For all details, P. HADOT, *Marius Victorinus. Recherches sur sa vie et ses œuvres* (Paris 1971).

<sup>3</sup> P. HADOT, *Porphyre et Victorinus I* (Paris 1968), 83 f.

(not least extensive use of Origen) that he is a Christian, as too his dedicatee, the Milanese dignitary Hosius<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the true heir to Plotinus and Porphyry as spiritual mentor of the Roman nobility was St. Jerome, even down to the flock of aristocratic ladies who attended his seminars on the *Old Testament*. By now Christianity had not only defeated paganism on the political and intellectual fronts; more important still, it was fashionable.

One cannot but feel that if Augustine, or any other intelligent but disillusioned young intellectual in search of the truth, had walked into the lecture room of Proclus at Athens rather than Ambrose's church or Mallius Theodorus' villa, his story might have been very different. But there *was* no Proclus in Rome or Milan, no hard-core pagan neoplatonist, to present him with the *full* truth according to Plato rather than just the bits that were consistent with Christianity. Significantly enough, like both Marius Victorinus and Firmicus Maternus before him, in neoplatonism Augustine found a bridge to Christianity.

In the East, with an unbroken succession in the Academy at Athens and in Alexandria, pagan neoplatonism managed to maintain itself for another century and a half. In the West it was effectively dead before the end of the fourth century. On academic grounds alone there was no one to match an Ambrose or an Augustine. The pagans were simply outclassed on their own ground.

The point is illustrated in a different way by Macrobius a generation later. An accomplished and keen neoplatonist (he called his son Plotinus<sup>2</sup>) and apparently a pagan, he writes a dialogue to which he assigns the dramatic date 384 with, as interlocutors, the last generation of committed pagan aristocrats—and then gives them nothing in particular to say, certainly

<sup>1</sup> See the preface to J. H. WASZINK's edition (*Plato Latinus IV*) and his article in *JbAC* 15 (1972), 236-244; add P. COURCELLE, in *Romanitas et Christianitas. Studia I.H. Waszink . . .*, 45-53.

<sup>2</sup> *JRS* 56 (1966), 37.

nothing that is even positively much less polemically anti-Christian. 384, of course, was the very year in which Praetextatus and Symmachus made their joint bid to get the altar of Victory restored. Of this not a word. Lots of variously fascinating material; the Roman calendar, republican menus, why women rarely get drunk (one speaker says because they are colder than men, another because they are hotter, which is also why they marry younger...), jokes of Augustus, and above all authors imitated by Vergil. But it is all on one footing, the learning of the ancients. Praetextatus, Symmachus and Flavianus appear in Macrobius' pages simply as great and learned men of an almost incidentally pagan past.

More surprisingly still, the more philosophical and mystical *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* contains even less that is specifically pagan. Which no doubt explains why it was so enormously popular and influential a book in the Christian Middle Ages.

Perhaps we ought to pause a moment on this preoccupation with Vergil, reflected also in the massive *Commentary* of Servius. One scholar has argued that it is not a purely literary phenomenon. Vergil, he claims, was a sort of pagan bible, and this is why the pagans wrote such ponderous commentaries on him, a reply to the commentaries with which men like Jerome were equipping the Scriptures. In particular, he drew attention to the fact that both Servius and Macrobius several times style Vergil *pontifex maximus*, which he connected with the emperor Gratian's ostentatious repudiation of that title only a year before the dramatic date of the *Saturnalia*, after disestablishing the pagan cults<sup>1</sup>. Now this theory was advanced under the impression that Macrobius and Servius *were* members of Symmachus' circle and that the *Saturnalia* dated from *ca.* 387, that is to say only three years after the affair of the altar of Victory and five years after

<sup>1</sup> E. TÜRK, "Les Saturnales de Macrobe source de Servius Danielis", in *REL* 41 (1963), 336 f.; cf. *JRS* 58 (1968), 101-102.



Gratian's repudiation of the *pontifex* title. Under these circumstances, there is a certain plausibility to his case. But now that Servius and Macrobius have both been put where they belong, in the 430s, everything takes on a rather different complexion. In any case, since both Servius and Macrobius share this conception of Vergil as *pontifex*, almost certainly it goes back to their common source, Aelius Donatus, the teacher of Jerome, who wrote well before the 380s. No one would wish to deny that the veneration in which Vergil was held at this period had a decidedly religious aura to it, but that is not quite the same as calling him an anti-Christian symbol. We must bear in mind that no classical author was more widely read and better loved among *Christians* than Vergil. Jerome (for example) quotes Vergil more often than all other classical authors put together; the bizarre practice of Vergilian centos, rewriting the *Gospels* in half-lines from Vergil, illustrates as well as anything the desire of Christians to appropriate what they could of the beauties of Vergil for their cause. Of course, not all Christians felt like this about Vergil, but enough did to ensure that Macrobius' discussions, which in any case focus exclusively on the antiquarian rather than patriotic and political aspects of Vergil's poetry, would not be considered subversive <sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> As F. PASCHOUD observes (*Roma Aeterna* (Rome 1967), 107-108), "ce qui est remarquable, c'est que l'entretien n'en arrive jamais à la signification politique, patriotique, des œuvres du poète. Et pourtant combien de passages n'invitent-ils pas à aborder un tel sujet...". He goes on to ask "si l'idéal de grandeur politique qui anime l'*Enéide*, et qui devrait être pour ces lettrés de la fin du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle comme une incitation à un patriotisme constructif, ne leur échappe pas en grande partie." For Augustine, by contrast, Vergil is indeed the poet of Roman pride and ambition; see the excellent discussion in H. HAGENDAHL, *Augustine and the Latin Classics* (Göteborg 1967), 384-463. No fewer than 94 lines of Vergil are quoted in full in the *De civitate Dei*, "a fundamental part of the settlement with the pagan past and the grand vision of the two cities" (H. HAGENDAHL, *ibid.*, 449). But I am not persuaded by the thesis of Macklin SMITH (*Prudentius' Psychomachia: a reexamination* (Princeton 1976)) that the *Psychomachia* represents an "assault upon Vergil", and that the frequent Vergilian quotations are characterized by deep "anti-Vergilian irony".

Still less would Macrobius' choice of Cicero for his other commentary have been construed in an anti-Christian sense. Pagans had tended to concentrate on Cicero's *Rhetorica* (like Marius Victorinus before his conversion) and the speeches, which were of course, religiously speaking, pretty neutral. But the philosophical works were grist to the Christian rather than pagan mill (one thinks of the *De divinatione* and *De natura deorum*, which were avidly read and exploited by Christians for the ammunition they supplied against divination, and the apparatus of the old state religion<sup>1</sup>. There is a nice but doubtless apocryphal story in Arnobius that the senate once voted to have *De natura deorum* burnt as a subversive book<sup>2</sup>. St. Ambrose's *De officiis* is closely modelled on Cicero's, a conscious attempt to combine the best of Cicero's stoicism with Christianity<sup>3</sup>. It was a reading of Cicero's *Hortensius* at the age of 19 that first inspired Augustine to look for a higher purpose in life<sup>4</sup>.

But it is the *De republica* (Book vi of which contains the *Dream of Scipio*) that best illustrates the point. For obvious political reasons it was hardly read in the early empire; in the late empire it was quoted, among the pagans, by the grammarians from time to time. It was only the Christians who read it for its content (as can be seen easily enough from the fragments collected in K. Ziegler's Teubner edition), above all Lactantius (for whom it was written *paene divina voce*) and Augustine in his *Civitas Dei*. So it is in the *Christian* rather than pagan branch of Ciceronian *Fortleben* that Macrobius' *Commentary* fits.

<sup>1</sup> See A.S. PEASE's editions of *De Natura Deorum* I (Cambridge, Mass. 1955), 53 f. and *De Divinatione* I (Urbana 1920), 29 f. It is worth quoting the characteristically pagan comment of Macrobius: *Tullius... quotiens aut de natura deorum aut de fato aut de divinatione disputat, gloriam, quam oratione conflavit, incondita rerum relatione minuat* (*Sat.* I 24, 4).

<sup>2</sup> *Adv. Nat.* III 7.

<sup>3</sup> H. HAGENDAHL, *Latin Fathers and the Classics* (Göteborg 1958), 348 f.

<sup>4</sup> *Conf.* III 4.

I am not (of course) suggesting that Macrobius was himself a Christian, still less that either of his books were in any sense Christian books. There is much in both of them that reflects his essentially nostalgic and literary paganism. But it could scarcely have occurred to Macrobius' Christian readers (by the 430s there would have been few pagan readers left) that there was anything *anti*-Christian about them. Had this been his purpose he would have had to go about his task in an altogether different way.

## V

There is another aspect of the *subscriptiones* and the editions they are supposed to bear witness to that calls for reassessment.

Though some textual scholars know better, historians continue to assert that it is to these editions that "we largely owe the preservation of culture in Western Europe". Or, from the standard study of the last pagan revival<sup>1</sup>: "And yet, while their fight for the ancient religion ended in failure, they gained on another front a victory which has made their names immortal: they rescued the works of the great Latin authors out of the darkness into which they had fallen during the anarchy of the third century, copied and emended them in the fashion inherited from the great scholars of Alexandria and so prepared editions which were improved texts, and which were to form the starting point for the mediaeval tradition of these authors. Without the assiduous activity of these men, much of Latin literature that has come down to us would have been irretrievably lost. . . . This is the historical achievement of the pagan revival at the end of the fourth century." Stirring stuff, but is it true? The fact is that *subscriptiones* prove no more and no less than that Sallustius,

<sup>1</sup> H. BLOCH, "A New Document of the Last Pagan Revival in the West", in *HTbR* 38 (1945), 240-241. The first quotation is from T. WHITTAKER, *Macrobius, or Philosophy, Science and Letters in the year 400* (Cambridge 1923), II.

Asterius or whoever *corrected his own copy*, usually though not always with the aid of a professional *grammaticus*. Indeed all four *subscriptiones* which mention Rome in all probability derive (as H.-I. Marrou saw for three of them) <sup>1</sup> from texts which a *boy* corrected at *school* under the supervision of his master. It was at once a standard academic exercise and the normal way of checking the work of a not always very literate copyist or calligrapher. No special scholarly concern with the text was involved. The only reason such unimportant details have come down to us at all is that these chanced to be copies that found their way into a monastery where some not very bright fellow copied out the owner's imposing looking signature as though it was a permanent part of the book. Apart from this they did nothing either to preserve or popularize their authors. In fact if the *subscriptiones* are any guide to the interests of the aristocracy, then they concerned themselves with a very narrow range of standard authors (Vergil, Horace, Terence, Livy) and school texts (Ps. Quintilianic *Declamations*), works which for the most part would certainly have been preserved in any case. Furthermore they were almost all authors as widely read by Christians as pagans. There is no question of pagans salvaging texts which Christians would have destroyed or allowed to perish. There is no proof that the authors of most of even the fourth century *subscriptiones* were pagans: those of the fifth and sixth centuries, in copies of the same classical authors, were certainly Christians.

Otto Jahn's famous study of the *subscriptiones*, published in 1851 and still not replaced or even updated, was deliberately confined to classical authors. It is perhaps because they did not realise this that so many scholars have assumed that this "editing" was an exclusively pagan activity. The fact is that we also have *subscriptiones* to Christian works of the period. Since we are concerned with the Roman aristocracy, the most relevant

<sup>1</sup> "La vie intellectuelle au Forum de Trajan et au Forum d'Auguste", in *MEFR* 49 (1932), 93-110.

example is a copy of one of Rufinus' translations from Gregory Nazianzen, collated in the house of his aristocratic patroness St. Melania <sup>1</sup>.

There is one further interesting sub-group among the secular *subscriptions*: those to Martial, Juvenal and Persius, bearing out the revival of interest in Silver Latin poetry we know to have taken place in the late fourth century <sup>2</sup>. This "renaissance" has been directly linked to those "close to Symmachus" because of the *subscriptio* in Juvenal MSS familiar all who read A.E. Housman's prefaces <sup>3</sup>: "I, Niceus, read and emended this in the house of Servius". The link, of course, is the assumption that Servius was a contemporary and associate of Symmachus. Even had this been true, the revival of interest in Juvenal can be taken back well before Symmachus and is in any case first attested in Christian writers. Persius too was a great favourite of Jerome.

So we cannot credit Symmachus and his circle with either the preservation of classical authors or the rediscovery of Silver Latin poetry. All we are entitled to say on the evidence of the *subscriptions* is that they devoted a lot of time to reading, copying and correcting their personal copies of their few favourite authors. The fact that these authors were also Christian favourites only underlines how little specifically pagan content was left to this literary paganism. It is easy to see why, sooner or later, the pagans capitulated to the inevitable. Christianity had taken over all that mattered in pagan culture, guaranteeing that "a minimum of Roman civilization would survive in a dangerous world"<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> ...*usque huc contuli de codice scae Melaniae Romae*, cf. A. ENGELBRECHT, *Tyr. Rufini... interpretatio I* (CSEL XLVI 1 (Wien 1910), pp. XXXII-XXXIII). That is to say someone checked his MS against what he (reasonably) took to be the authoritative copy in Melania's library, no doubt corrected in her own (if not Rufinus') hand.

<sup>2</sup> *Hermes* 92 (1964), 371 f.; I shall be describing this revival more fully elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> See his edition of Lucan (Oxford 1926), p. XVI f.

<sup>4</sup> P. BROWN, *Religion and Society...*, (cf. p. 2 n. 1), 182.

## VI

Let us draw together some of the threads. It may well seem that much of what I have been saying is pretty negative. But it was not at all my purpose simply to debunk the Circle of Symmachus—though I cannot conceal my conviction that it has come in for wholly unmerited admiration for quite long enough. My contention is rather that, despite their genuine enthusiasm for classical (or rather Latin) literature, despite those hours spent poring over MSS; let us even be charitable enough to forget for the moment that Macrobius and above all the ludicrously overrated Servius filched most of their material from predecessors whose names they suppress, and even call them learned; yet despite all this it was precisely on the literary and cultural front that the pagan aristocrats were most vulnerable. So far from the “astonishingly intense pagan reaction” that Professor Alföldi finds wherever he looks, reaction of any sort is conspicuous by its absence. Apathy, rather, born of aristocratic complacency.

Some twenty years ago A. Campana discovered a collection of poems, the so-called *Epigrammata Bobiensia*, put together by a certain Naucellius, already known as a literary friend of Symmachus. Those who were expecting an exciting new document of the pagan revival were to be sadly disappointed. The most interesting thing about them, as Peter Brown has remarked, is precisely “that they have nothing new to contribute; they mirror exactly this quiet world, dominated in its literary expression by the traditional forms of the good life”<sup>1</sup>. It is summed up in poem 5 of the collection:

*Parcus amator opum, blandorum victor honorum,  
hic studia et Musis otia amica colo . . .  
vivere sic placidamque iuvat proferre senectam,  
docta revolventem scripta virum veterum.*

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, 162.

On all sides we find this preoccupation with what was past rather than a realistic attempt to grapple with the present. Perhaps Christianity would just go away one day. Even Symmachus' own much admired plea for the restoration of the altar of Victory (*Relatio* 3) stands or falls on the argument from tradition; that is to say, it fell. It is worth noting in passing that Symmachus' *Relatio* was paid the compliment of two careful Christian refutations, by Ambrose and Prudentius. Neither Symmachus nor any of his pagan fellows seem to have made any such serious or sustained attempt to answer Christianity on its own terms. It is most unlikely that pagans read Christians as carefully as Christians read pagans. St. Jerome, for example, shameless plagiarist that we now know him to have been, was unscrupulous enough to incorporate large chunks of the arch-pagan Porphyry in his own polemical writings with no acknowledgement and the minimum necessary alterations<sup>1</sup>. He evidently knew enough of the state of pagan neoplatonism and the reading habits of his pagan contemporaries to feel confident that he ran no risk of exposure in that quarter. It was only his Christian rival Rufinus who was able to catch him out.

The Roman aristocracy will continue to repay study. The great families continued to play a prominent role in the social, literary and religious life of Rome. But it is rival *Christian* factions that increasingly dominate the scene, while the pagans fade more and more into the background, thrown momentarily into a dazzling but perhaps misleading prominence by the occasional spectacular confrontations. The great issues that divided the nobility were internal Christian issues: Origenism, Pelagianism, asceticism (the scandal when Jerome's young ladies started to die of malnutrition). Above all, it was the great Christian families who came, already, by Symmachus' day, to take on the traditional aristocratic function of providing literary patronage.

<sup>1</sup> P. COURCELLE, *Late Latin Writers* . . . , 79 f.

## DISCUSSION

*M. Fontaine* : Cette « revision déchirante » de la réaction païenne, et de sa virulence intellectuelle et polémique, est de grande conséquence pour une représentation plus exacte de la vie littéraire au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle, et, donc, du développement des formes de la littérature chrétienne pendant cette période. Car elle fait justice d'un dualisme dramatique et d'un partage sectaire de la société, qui aurait introduit une sorte d'*apartheid* idéologique dans les manifestations concrètes de la vie intellectuelle.

Trois remarques partiellement hypothétiques découlent de cette constatation. D'abord, les auditoires respectifs, des *recitationes* dans les *auditoria* et des sermons dans les basiliques, n'ont pas dû regrouper des publics respectivement et strictement païens et chrétiens. Ensuite, les extrémistes des deux bords (par ex. Prétextat ou Jérôme) ont été plus bruyants que nombreux; et il faut compter avec un très vaste « marais » de païens et de chrétiens tièdes, surtout après les lois de Théodose qui encouragent les premiers à la lâcheté, et une grande masse au conformisme chrétien. Enfin, si telle fut la réalité sociale, force est d'en conclure que, comme le monde de l'école, ou celui des lectures personnelles de chacun, l'esthétique a, pour une bonne part, échappé aux idéologies: d'où une autonomie, une cohérence dans l'évolution des genres et des styles, facilitées par une coexistence culturelle beaucoup plus pacifique qu'on ne se l'est imaginée, même dans la société romaine de la seconde partie du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle. C'est d'ailleurs ce que suggèrent, au milieu du siècle, le contenu du calendrier de 354 ou la juxtaposition des décors funéraires païens et chrétiens dans l'hypogée de la *Via Latina*.

Deux observations de détail: la notion de « renaissance » littéraire au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle doit être posée à partir du slogan tétrarchique et monétaire de la *reparatio imperii*, et il faudrait en examiner la fortune et les vicissitudes au long du siècle, pour mieux comprendre la



*renovatio litterarum*, conditionnée par celle de l'Empire. En second lieu, le problème des protecteurs romains d'Ammien Marcellin devient à la fois plus clair (la société romaine ne gravite pas autour des seuls Symmaque) et plus obscur (ces protecteurs peuvent même avoir été chrétiens; étaient-ce des nobles authentiques de vieille souche romaine, ou des *emeriti* de l'une des deux *militiae*?).

*M. Ludwig*: Der Vortrag hatte zwei Hauptthemen, die Frage nach den Mitgliedern des sogenannten Symmachuskreises, dessen Reduzierung sehr überzeugte, und die weitere Frage nach dem Verhalten der Heiden gegenüber dem Christentum am Ende des vierten Jahrhunderts und dem christlichen Verhalten gegenüber der alten heidnischen Literatur. Zu den scharfsinnigen und anregenden Ausführungen in dieser Hinsicht möchte ich zwei Fragen stellen.

1) Was waren die Motive des Macrobius, wenn er um 430 in den *Saturnalien* die aktuelle politische Situation im Jahre 384, vor allem den Kampf um den Altar der Victoria, nicht erwähnte? War es das Bestreben, seine mehrheitlich christliche Umwelt nicht an jenen 'ephemerem' Streitpunkt zu erinnern, in dem die heidnische Partei unterlegen war und um 430 rückblickend keine besondere Sympathie erwarten konnte, und statt dessen die Gelehrsamkeit jener Heiden hervorzuheben, die sie auch für Christen der Generation von 430 in gewisser Hinsicht bewundernswürdig machen konnte?

2) Die Stellung von Heiden und Christen zu Vergil ist vielleicht etwas komplexer als in der Darstellung bisher deutlich wurde. Sie ist sicher weder einheitlich in Bezug auf die Personen, noch konstant in Bezug auf die Zeiten. Wie fügt sich in Ihr Bild vom Verhältnis der Christen zu Vergil die explizite Ablehnung seiner Lektüre durch Augustin? Lässt sich den *Saturnalien*, selbst wenn sie erst um 430 verfasst wurden, nicht entnehmen, dass die Heiden der Generation des Praetextatus dafür bekannt waren, Vergil als 'ihren' Dichter verehrt zu haben?

*M. Duval*: Je ne pense pas qu'on puisse considérer l'utilisation de Virgile en bloc ni la position des auteurs chrétiens de la fin du

IV<sup>e</sup> siècle à son égard comme une pure et simple « récupération ». Il faudrait, pour le premier point, étudier la fréquence relative des citations des *Bucoliques*, des *Géorgiques*, beaucoup plus « ornementales », et de l'*Enéide*: le contenu *religieux* de ces différentes œuvres n'est pas le même. Quant à l'attitude de Jérôme ou d'Ambroise à l'égard de Virgile, elle n'est pas une et simple: Virgile est tantôt un allié, tantôt un adversaire, ou du moins quelqu'un qui appartient au camp des adversaires, des *gentiles*. Virgile peut offrir un point de départ ou un *confirmatur*.

*M. Herzog*: Vergil als christlich-paganen « Kampfobjekt » sollte vor einem weiteren historischen Hintergrund gesehen werden; im übrigen bestärkt gerade dieser Teilaspekt die Generalthese A. Camerons in einem grösseren Ausmass, als es in der Vorlage zum Ausdruck kommt. Denn die intensive, weltanschauliche und positive Usurpation Vergils beginnt bereits bei Laktanz; sie setzt sich über Juvenecus und Proba in grosser literarisch-imitativer Vielfalt fort (und wird erst am Ende des 4. Jh., und zwar in der *innerchristlichen*, ästhetischen Diskussion, nicht in der Praxis, in Frage gestellt). Demgegenüber fügt sich die Vergil-Diskussion bei Macrobius mit der sorgsam Beschränkung auf Grammatisches und Philologisches der von A. Cameron gekennzeichneten zurückweichenden Reduktion in der lateinisch-paganen Literatur ein: es wurde offensichtlich kein militant-paganer Gegen-Vergil in Szene gesetzt.

*M. Cameron*: I am sure W. Ludwig is right about Macrobius' reasons for playing down the paganism of his interlocutors. I think that he chose 384 as his dramatic date, not for the political associations that spring to our minds, but simply so as to set his symposium shortly before the death of its host Praetextatus, a curious but established tradition of the genre (*JRS* 56 (1966), 28-29, and *CR* N.S. 17 (1967), 258-61). I was certainly oversimplifying about Vergil, but I think that my basic point is valid (on Augustine, see p. 24 n. 1).

*M. Duval*: M. Cameron vient de nous donner, me semble-t-il, une excellente leçon de méthode britannique; mais à l'envers: alors que les Britanniques ont coutume de collecter les petits indices, en particulier sur le plan prosopographique, et de nous proposer une belle construction, M. Cameron rassemble les indices de caractère prosopographique, il examine les différentes pierres de l'édifice païen pour constater qu'elles ne peuvent faire une construction homogène, et il attribue aux chrétiens cette volonté de récupérer les matériaux et de « bâtir » quelque chose. En ce qui concerne les chrétiens, il faudrait à mon avis examiner chaque « pierre », se demander si elle n'est pas plus composite que vous ne le dites.

La deuxième tendance de votre exposé consiste à opposer l'attitude de l'Orient et celle de l'Occident d'une part, l'attitude de l'aristocratie romaine au IV<sup>e</sup> et au III<sup>e</sup> siècle d'autre part. Sur le premier point, je vous accorde sans difficulté que l'activité littéraire païenne a été beaucoup plus importante et durable en Orient qu'en Occident; encore faudrait-il se demander si elle a été en Orient le fait d'une aristocratie. La comparaison entre les deux aristocraties du III<sup>e</sup> et du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle à Rome se fonde principalement sur la *Vie de Plotin* et sur ce que nous savons des relations de Plotin et de ses disciples avec l'aristocratie romaine. Or, nous ne voyons pas que ces aristocrates aient écrit *eux-mêmes*, et il ne faut peut-être pas se laisser leurrer sur leur culture par les dédicaces qui leur sont faites.

Si, au contraire, on élargit le panorama, on constate que l'aristocratie de Rome a toujours « renâclé » devant la culture littéraire et, surtout, philosophique. Cicéron en savait quelque chose, et l'*Hortensius* est précisément dédié à un grand orateur et à un grand aristocrate qui pensait que la philosophie était inutile. C'est d'ailleurs dans le « cercle » de ces grands aristocrates qu'on voit évoluer des écrivains qui ne sont que des protégés, et qui n'appartiennent pas eux-mêmes à l'aristocratie. Les aristocrates se contentent de lire. Or, sur ces *lectures*, je voudrais apporter deux témoignages qui, sans doute, ne concernent pas Rome mais peuvent, je crois, lui être appliqués sans grand risque d'erreur. Dans sa *Lettre à Jovius*, Paulin de Nole fait remarquer à son correspondant que sa prose ne peut s'expliquer

que par de très nombreuses lectures, et il énumère les noms de Cicéron, Démosthène, Xénophon, Caton, Varron, « sans compter ceux dont Paulin ignore même le nom » (*Epist.* 16,6). Ce ne sont pas là de simples « classiques » scolaires. Au milieu du V<sup>e</sup> siècle, Sidoine Apollinaire décrit le cabinet de lecture d'un grand propriétaire. On y trouve Varron, qui est comparé à Augustin (*Epist.* II 9,4). Je pense donc que dans les « salons » de Rome, si on n'écrivait pas, on lisait (comme le montre l'épigramme de Naucellius: *revolvere scripta virum veterum*) et on parlait.

Il ne faut pas oublier que nous sommes en un temps où il était dangereux d'attaquer le christianisme de face. Symmaque évoque les gens qui croient faire leur cour en abandonnant le culte païen. L'aristocratie cherchait à subsister et avait davantage le sens de la carrière que le goût du martyre !

*M. Cameron:* I am sure you are right about the preference of aristocrats for reading rather than writing. Nonetheless, the very fact that they did read rather than write, and read the "old books", is bound to have meant that their paganism became increasingly literary, lacking the religious content that could hold them back indefinitely from the inevitable pressure towards Christianity. The unbroken list of *subscriptions* from the pagan fourth to the Christian sixth century is as good an illustration as any. It is, as you say, the writers that aristocrats protect that matter, but here too we see the weakness of the pagan party. It was naturally the great Christian families that captured such as Jerome, Rufinus and Pelagius—not to mention Claudian. Significantly enough Macrobius had to commit an anachronism (as he admits) to include the one really prominent pagan scholar of the turn of the century in Praetextatus' circle, namely Servius.

*M. van der Nat:* It is true that Macrobius does not allude to the events of 384, and so on a political level polemics against the Christians are totally absent. Still the contents of the *Saturnalia* are not as neutral and harmless as it would seem: it is not only antiquarian

information which is given, and the work contains at least two elements which most probably have an anti-Christian aim, and which may be interpreted as polemical on an ideological and cultural level. First there is the long discourse delivered by Praetextatus in Book I (17-23): he demonstrates that almost all gods are manifestations of *Sol*, and after having exposed this solar theology he is praised as the only one who has an adequate knowledge and understanding of the secret nature of the gods. Secondly we have the unpleasant figure of Euangelus (certainly a telling name) who is characterized as an insolent and rude person, sharply contrasting the *urbanitas* of the pagan aristocrats.

*M. Cameron*: Yes, perhaps the *Saturnalia* is not quite so innocuous as I suggested. But it remains true that by ignoring the actual political situation at the time of his dramatic date, Macrobius portrays his interlocutors as protagonists of a purely cultural paganism. As for Euangelus, it must be borne in mind (a) that any literary symposium must have its uninvited guest who interrupts and provokes the others (J. Martin, *Symposion* (Paderborn 1931), 64); and (b) that Symmachus, *Epist.* VI 7,2 refers to a real person called Euangelus, an unpleasant fellow whose *incautus animus* led him to take risks. Macrobius may not have been displeased with the implication that his urbane pagan assembly was being harrassed by a boorish Christian, but can we be sure that the real Euangelus *was* a Christian? He may well be the Fl. Claudius Euangelus v.c. who built a temple of Apollo at Rome between 357 and 359 (Dessau, *ILS* 3222). However, if Macrobius got the idea for his ἀκλήτος (as I suspect) from Symmachus' letter quoted above, then he may not have known.

*M. Herzog*: Das neue Bild von den heidnisch-christlichen Auseinandersetzungen am Ende des 4. Jh. ist von A. Cameron überzeugend dargestellt worden. Es bleiben Fragen nach dem Beginn der unterschiedlichen Entwicklung im griechischen und im lateinischen Bereich offen, vor allem die Frage nach den Ursachen und Folgen der lateinischen Entwicklung. Ist wirklich die Krise des

3. Jh. nur eine politisch-militärische gewesen? Existiert in der lateinischen heidnischen Literatur nicht tatsächlich eine kulturelle Lücke oder Depression bis ca. 350? Ich vermute, dass eben diese Diskontinuität im lateinischen Westen auch die Potenz und den Formenreichtum der christlich-lateinischen Literatur bis zum Ende des 4. Jh. mitbewirkt hat.

*M. Schmidt:* Ihre Skepsis gegenüber der sogenannten « Renaissance » des späten 4. Jh. meint einmal die Bewertung und dann die Benennung dieser literarischen Epoche. Zweifelsohne wird man die Entwicklung vom 3. zum 4. Jh. im Bereich der Griechischkenntnis und — damit zusammenhängend — der philosophischen Aktivität in Rom anders als auf dem literarischen Sektor akzentuieren müssen. Dennoch ist nicht zu übersehen, dass um die Mitte des 4. Jh. von der Grammatikschule des Donat neue Impulse ausgegangen sind — Hieronymus hat als *puer* dort neben den traditionellen Schulklassikern (Vergil, Sallust, Cicero, Terenz, Plautus, Lukrez, Horaz) bereits Persius und Lukan lesen können (*Adv. Rufin.* I 16) —, Impulse, die auf der Stufe der Rhetorenschule zu einer intensiveren Beschäftigung mit der kaiserzeitlichen Literatur führten (Juvenal, Martial, Senecas *Tragödien*, Plinius' *Briefe*). Schon die um 340-350 geborene Generation (Ambrosius, Hieronymus) kann von dieser Entgrenzung des Kanons profitieren, die, wenn ich recht sehe, zu der neuen, christlich wie säkular geprägten Blüte der literarischen Produktion gegen Ende des Jahrhunderts und darüber hinaus (Augustin, Ammian, Claudian, Prudentius) entscheidend beigetragen hat. Ob man allerdings diesen Aufschwung als « Renaissance » bezeichnen soll, bleibt eine Frage der Definition. Sicher geht es nicht um eine Rückwendung zu einem in der historischen Distanz fremd Gewordenen, sondern um ein sich neu Vergewissern einer verschütteten, nicht aber abgebrochenen Tradition als Resultat einer « Bildungsreform ».

*M. Fuhrmann:* Herrn Camerons Beitrag hat den Symmachus-Kreis « entmythologisiert » — wie zuvor H. Strasburger den Kreis des jüngeren Scipio (in beiden Fällen nahm die vorausgehende

Forschung eine mythisierende literarische Darstellung — Ciceros *De re publica*, die *Saturnalien* des Macrobius — zu sehr beim Wort).

Zum Ganzen zwei modifizierende Hinweise: 1) Die Krise des 3. Jh. lässt sich schwerlich bestreiten. Sie betrifft weder die griechische noch die christliche lateinische, wohl aber die römische Literatur: wir können in diesem Bereich der Zeit von 239 bis 283 keinen Autor und kein Werk mit Sicherheit zuweisen; 2) Seit dem Ausgang des 3. Jh. tun sich auf « heidnischer » Seite sukzessive folgende Kräfte hervor: das Kaisertum, die Schule, die Aristokratie. Hierbei gehen die pure — « physische » — Restauration des Staates und die Verteidigung des überkommenen Staatsbewusstseins ineinander über.

Die « Entmythologisierung » des Symmachus-Kreises selbst ist wohl zwingend. Darüber darf indes das grosse Ausmass der gesamten restaurativen Bemühungen nicht vergessen werden: die Umschrift der Texte in die neue Buchform des Codex, das Stratum von Artes und Kommentaren oder Scholien (zu Terenz, Cicero, Vergil usw.), das alles Frühere nahezu völlig verdrängt hat. A. Cameron hat die bisherigen Subjekte dieser Tätigkeit, die bisherige Rollenverteilung in der literarischen Kultur des 4. Jh. erfolgreich bezweifelt — es gilt nun aufs neue zu fragen, welche Kräfte bewirkt haben, dass die Kontinuität gewahrt und die Grundlegung des Mittelalters vollzogen wurde.

*M. Schmidt*: So überzeugend Ihre Redimensionierung des Symmachus-Kreises ausfällt, so sehr ist doch auch eine gewisse Tendenz unverkennbar, die Konturen des gezielt paganen Engagements gegen Ende des 4. Jh. im Dunkeln zu lassen. So konzедieren Sie etwa, dass es sich bei Obsequens' *Liber prodigiorum* um eine pagane Interpretation der römischen Geschichte handeln könnte, wie ich meinerseits gerne einräume, die Beziehungen zum Symmachus-Kreis ohne genügende Beweise hergestellt zu haben (*Iulius Obsequens und das Problem der Livius-Epitome*, Abh. Akad. Mainz, Geistes- u. sozialwiss. Kl. 1968, 5, 80 f.). Wenn Sie allerdings die Möglichkeit einer Datierung ins 2. oder 3. Jh. nicht ausschliessen, würde mich interessieren, ob dies eher zu Ihrem Bild vom Paganismus des 4. Jh.

passt, oder ob Sie sich auf Argumente gegen meinen Ansatz nach der *Epitome* von Oxyrhynchus (*ibid.*, 31 ff.) stützen. Ich würde heute noch stärker auf der Spätdatierung insistieren. Obsequens versucht als erster, den historiographischen Topos der Prodigienlisten und ihrer Sühnung einer theologischen Deutung der republikanischen Geschichte zugrundezulegen (*ibid.*, 72 ff.), ein Ansatz, der ohne die Provokation durch die christliche Teleologie kaum vorstellbar ist. Er repräsentiert genau jene Haltung zu den Katastrophen der römischen Geschichte — die Missachtung des Götterzorns führt ins Verderben —, die Orosius und Augustin bekämpfen. Im weiteren Kontext der spätantiken Livius-Rezeption könnte dies bedeuten, dass der vollständige Livius, den Obsequens benutzt (*ibid.*, 65 ff.), in heidnischen Kreisen für eine entsprechende Deutung der römischen Geschichte ausgewertet wurde, die dann von Orosius und Augustin — ebenfalls an Hand des kompletten Textes — widerlegt wurde. Es scheint mir nach wie vor kein Zufall, dass ein Prototyp unserer Livius-Überlieferung in der Familie der Nicomachi Flaviani emendiert wurde (cf. H. Bloch, in *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity...*, 215 f.).

*M. Paschoud*: La préoccupation principale des derniers païens de l'aristocratie romaine n'est ni philosophique, ni même spécifiquement littéraire; ils veulent sauver l'héritage de la grandeur politique de Rome, célébrée par Virgile et Tite-Live; ces deux écrivains les intéressent surtout pour cette raison. Si Ammien écrit en latin, c'est sans doute pour se rattacher à la lignée des chantres de l'œuvre de Rome. Aux yeux d'un Symmaque, le paganisme fait partie intégrante de cet héritage, et c'est pour cette raison qu'il doit être maintenu. L'expression littéraire de cette tradition politique constituait aussi pour les derniers païens un instrument de prestige, comme le montrent notamment les éditions de grand luxe de Virgile qui paraissent vers cette époque. La disparition de cette forme de paganisme a été hâtée par le fait que l'Eglise chrétienne a pris en charge et exploité à son profit les idéaux politiques qui faisaient sa raison d'être.



Certes, les derniers païens n'expriment leur point de vue qu'avec timidité. Cela s'explique: ils vivent sous un régime totalitaire et terroriste, qui a clairement opté pour le christianisme. Il est remarquable que chez un Zosime, on trouve une défense du paganisme, mais non une attaque contre le christianisme — exception faite de la polémique contre les moines; mais ces derniers étaient contestés à l'intérieur même de la religion nouvelle.

Je ne crois pas que la culture et la littérature profanes fussent totalement innocentes aux yeux des chrétiens. Si Jérôme a mauvaise conscience d'être « cicéronien », c'est que les auteurs profanes sont les porte-drapeau d'un système de valeurs, d'une vision de l'histoire et du monde qu'un chrétien ne pouvait que condamner à maints égards.