Ambrose of Milan and Community Formation in Late Antiquity

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Edited by

Ethan Gannaway and Robert Grant

To our colleagues, students, and alumni for supporting and challenging us to continue to learn from and to teach others about Ambrose of Milan.

To Anne, Owen, Henry, and Charlie.

To the late Angela Russell Christman.

neque enim virtutis gratia cum corpore occidit non idem naturae meritorumque finis

Ambrose, *De excessu fratris* 1.63

We are grateful to her family for permitting us the honor of this posthumous publication of her work.

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Fig. 1-1. Callinicum. Map courtesy of Angelo Di Berardino, ed., *Atlas of Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: ICC Press, 2014), 19, map 11.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

For Ambrose, we generally follow the abbreviations of his works found in Ivor Davidson, *Ambrose*: De Officiis, 1:xxiv-xxv. For the dual language (Latin and Italian) editions of Ambrose's work published as volumes of *Sancti Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis Opera*, we abbreviate as *SAEMO*. Please note that some authors chose to cite *SAEMO* instead of *CSEL*, although the dual language (Latin and Italian) *SAEMO* editions include the then contemporary *CSEL* edition. The editors of the various *SAEMO* volumes, however, have sometimes commented on and sometimes altered the Latin editions. For classical sources, please follow the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th ed. For periodicals, we follow the conventions of *L'Année Philologique*.

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INTRODUCTION

ETHAN GANNAWAY AND ROBERT GRANT

In April 2018, The Academy for the Study of Saint Ambrose of Milan at St. Ambrose University hosted an international conference, "Ambrose of Milan: (Re)Constructing Community." The objective of the conference was to examine how Ambrose built or reshaped community. Ambrose, of course, participated in many types of community, comprised of many different types of people. These communal entities, whether large (the court, upper class, lower class, etc.) or small (ecclesial congregations, clerics, vowed women, collegia, gangs, literati, etc.), overlapped one another in complex and often tense ways. Reflecting this variety, our conference included a broad diversity of perspectives. These multifarious approaches represent this late antique bishop's manifold labors to unite his constituents in order to provide some stability during a period of religious, political, military, and social upheavals and transformations. Thirteen unique, individual interpretations of the theme are collected here to understand better Ambrose's complex character by identifying the communities he affected and his motives for doing so.

Scholars have studied the transformations of late ancient communities for a very long time, and the resulting scholarship has been accordingly copious. Edward Gibbon's divisions set the stage for Roman history by such oppositions as Roman and barbarian, elite and the masses, soldier and civilian, pagan and Christian, and Church and Empire.[1] Under Peter Brown, late antiquity became a period in its own right, as he articulated the many different groups of people who shaped it.[2] The period became known for its exciting transformations, where some fought for old traditions and some began novel ones, resulting in a new interplay of rulers and ruled, citizens and outsiders, rich and poor. His corpus of scholarship has continued to advance our understanding of many late antique communities, nuancing

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[1] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1776-1789).
[2] Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1989, reprint; London: Thames and Hudson, 1971).

their compositions, interactions, and interdependencies. As for Ambrose, in Gibbon and Brown, the bishop was a champion of opposition, defending Christian versus pagan, Nicaean versus heretic, and poor versus rich. This role was made possible through his relationships with classically educated elites, social ordinaries, merchants, and masses, in addition to bonds with clergy and saints.[3]

The abundant current research on late antique communities engages the evidence in original and complex ways, which has led to a perspectival diversity regarding identity and community. In a recent issue of *Studies in Late Antiquity* that focused on community, the editor, Elizabeth Depalma Digeser, provided an introduction explicitly entitled "Building Community in Late Antiquity."[4] In it, she rightly asserts the tendency of historians to read only of ruin during this period, still following Gibbon's thesis, except in regards to Church developments such as episcopal centers and monasteries.[5] Tamara Lewit's contribution focuses on specific villages in an attempt to see community resilience, especially through economic and social lenses.[6] Still other articles note both a continuity with the Roman past and an effort to fuse Roman tradition with current religious and cultural circumstances.[7] Such studies demonstrate the various and shifting community reactions during this period and the subsequent difficulty in describing these communities as built and new or rebuilt and renewed.

A view focused on a late antique region or community can offer detailed insights into the lives and values of its people. Eric Rebillard's, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200-450 CE*, provides an example. Rebillard considers identity, especially that of lay

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[3] For Ambrose in Gibbon, see chapters 27 and 28; for a recent treatment of Ambrose in Peter Brown, see "Ambrose and His People" and "'Avarice, the Root of All Evil': Ambrose and Northern Italy," in *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 120-47.

[4] Elizabeth Depalma Digeser, "Building Community in Late Antiquity," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 4 (2020), 1-3.

[5] Digeser, "Building Community," 1.

[6] Tamara Lewit, "A Viewpoint on Eastern Mediterranean Villages in Late Antiquity: Applying the Lens of Community Resilience Theory," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 4 (2020): 44-75.

[7] Martijn Icks, "The Urbs Aeterna in the Representation of Maxentius, Nepotian, and Priscus Attalus," 4-43; Francesco Rotiroti, "Religion and the Construction of a Christian Roman Polity: Insanity, Identity, and Exclusion in the Religious Legislation of the Theodosian Code," 76-113; Raphael Schwitter, "A "Roman" Wedding in Vandal Africa: Triangular Intertextuality and Generic Appropriation in Luxurius' *Epithalamium Fridi* (*Anthologia latina* 18 Riese)," 114-32.

Christians in North Africa from the second to the fifth century. Rebillard examines, in part, the methods men like Tertullian and Augustine used to unite Christians who remained stalwartly engaged in secular and pagan communities.[8] How does one reconcile, for example, the maker of pagan idols who is a practicing Christian? Ultimately, according to Rebillard, members of Christian communities did not stop participating in their secular pursuits, even when such activities may have contradicted Christian precepts and beliefs. In each instance, the citizens of these communities retained a continuity with the Roman past, sometimes a peculiarly local Roman past, and undertook subtle or, conversely, drastic innovations. In these assessments of late Roman communities, however, theological approaches have factored little, if at all.[9]

Ambrose's biography permits modern scholars to apply, broadly speaking, historical and theological methodologies. As an aristocratic bishop of the imperial city of Milan, Ambrose stood at the crux of many different communities and, by his peculiar position and training and by his own initiative, influenced them profoundly. This context, paired with the profusion of sources Ambrose left to posterity, provides a unique opportunity to seek the inner motivations of a late antique bishop regarding his delicate balance of various community commitments and responsibilities. Roughly twenty-five years ago, Neil McLynn offered a cogent, thoughtful, and complex study of Ambrose, even dedicating considerable space to address Ambrose's community efforts.[10] McLynn's intent, however, was to demonstrate that Ambrose viewed community as a means to acquire personal political power. Subsequent studies mitigated the political motivations of Ambrose by reconsidering his episcopal responsibilities, his Nicene theology, and his asceticism, for example. Indeed, others have suggested that in Ambrose's endeavors to lead his people as both Roman and Christian he strove for a type of communism, socialism, or within the existing empire,

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[8] Eric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200-450 CE* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

[9] This focus on economic, political, and sociological aspects without the theological appears to be the case with the very recent *Leadership and Community in Late Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Raymond Van Dam*, edited by Y. R. Kim, A. E. T. McLaughlin, Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages (CELAMA 26) (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020). This book, however, arrived too recently to be reviewed.

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

an elite Roman Christianity (or Roman Christian imperialism?).[11] Using sociology and anthropology, a recent perspective found Ambrose building community through a "rhetoric of heresy," by which he enhanced the intensity and popularity of doctrinal (i.e., Arian) opposition in Milan to make orthodoxy the champion and himself the authority.[12] Yet, a theological approach brought attention to Ambrose's pastoral work to care for Milan's faithful, while other studies find Ambrose making Christian communities by reinterpreting traditional philosophical ideas, especially Stoic.[13]

The publication of a 2009 conference in Berlin, *Rom und Mailand in der Spätantike: Repräsentationen städtischer Räume in Literatur, Architektur und Kunst,* edited by Therese Fuhrer, has produced some interesting new research on the relationship between Ambrose and Milan, if in the wider context of Milan and Rome as late antique capitals. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the variety and depths of these studies. Therese Fuhrer, addressing *Denkräume*, looks at Augustine's experience in Milan, exploring the influence of Ambrosian orthodoxy and relating it to physical space.[14] Annette Haug examines the archaeological record for the city's physical form, finding a unique relationship in Milan, where there was no senate, between emperor and elites.[15] Furthermore, Claudia Tiersch adds another community dimension by delving into the social interactions in fourth-century Milan, especially investigating the secular complications in Ambrose's

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[11] See, for example, Arthur C. Lovejoy, "The Communism of Saint Ambrose," *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 3, no. 4 (October, 1942), 458-68; Vincent Vasey, *The Social ideas in the works of Saint Ambrose: a study on* De Nabuthe (Rome: Institutum Patristicum "Augustinianum", 1982).

[12] Michael Stuart Williams, *The Politics of Heresy in Ambrose of Milan: Community and Consensus in Late Antique Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[13] Cesare Pasini, *Ambrose of Milan: Deeds and Thought of a Bishop*, trans. Robert L. Grant (Staten Island, NY: St. Paul, 2013); Ivor Davidson, *Ambrose:* De officiis, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Marcia L. Colish, *Ambrose's Patriarchs: Ethics for the Common Man* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

[14] Therese Fuhrer, "'Denkräume' Konstellationen von Personen, Texten und Gebäuden im spätantiken Mailand," in *Rom und Mailand in der Spätantike: Repräsentationen städtischer Räume in Literatur, Architektur und Kunst. Topoi,* ed. Therese Fuhrer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 357-77.

[15] Annette Haug, "Die Stadt als Repräsentationsraum Rom und Mailand im 4. Jh. n.Chr.," in *Rom und Mailand in der Spätantike: Repräsentationen städtischer Räume in Literatur, Architektur und Kunst. Topoi,* ed. Therese Fuhrer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 111-36.

pastoral efforts.[16] In addition to the value of the chapters in their own right, the collection as a whole provides a model for interdisciplinary dialogue, namely between literary image and topography, couched in the larger conversation of capital cities with and without an emperor. This volume has refined the bishop's role as it related to this imperial city and its people, yet looks primarily through lenses of history and archaeology, leaving room for theological methodologies.

Finally, the Studia Ambrosiana series has provided different thematic and methodological approaches to Ambrose and his times. Its volumes are first a collection of articles originally presented as papers at the annual Dies Academicus of the Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana (Classe di Studi Ambrosiani, Accademia Ambrosiana) in Milan, but also include outside contributions.[17] Predominately this series provides the latest Italian research on the late Roman bishop, balancing theology, history, and archaeology in addition to other fields. For this introduction, let it suffice to note that the most recent volume titles reveal the increasing interest in nuancing Ambrose's persona. Such titles include a review of a traditional and much studied religious topic, *Ambrogio e l'Arianesimo*; a new look at Milan and Rome through a common martyr, *Il Culto di San Lorenzo tra Roma e Milano*; and a contribution to current trends in social history, *Ambrogio e la questione sociale*.[18] The mere ability to produce volumes dedicated to such specific aspects of Ambrose's life demonstrate the profound richness of the sources to understand his character and behavior and the late antique context in which he lived.

This brief review establishes several trends and lines of inquiry important to this current volume. First, interdisciplinary studies provide a clearer view of the complexities of late antique communities. The methodologies and the evidence can vary greatly. Second, the people of late antiquity could find themselves members of several different types of community, some of which were antagonistic. This conflict leads to numerous questions. How did one feel like they were a member of a certain

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[16] Claudia Tiersch, "Mailand im 4. Jh. – ein christliches Rom?" in *Rom und Mailand in der Spätantike: Repräsentationen städtischer Räume in Literatur, Architektur und Kunst. Topoi,* ed. Therese Fuhrer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 393-413.

[17] The greater international community has also contributed immensely to Ambrosian scholarship, exceptionally so the Sources Chretiennes, and as demonstrated most recently in *Progetti e prospettive di ricerca su Sant'Ambrogio a livello internazionale*, ed. Emanuele Ghelfi, Studia Ambrosiana 12 (Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 2019).

[18] Respectively, vols. 7 (2013), 8 (2015), and 10 (2017), each edited by Raffaele Passarella and published by the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan.

community? When one's overlapping communities came into conflict, how did one decide to participate? And what were the repercussions of those decisions? When and how did members leave communities? Who shaped and reshaped the composition of them? Ambrose's own intricate relationship with his intersecting communities, sometimes seriously and uncompromisingly at odds, yet awaits a more thorough and complex examination. How can archaeological, literary, philosophical, and theological approaches, and others, coordinate to help create a composite picture of Ambrose and his relationships with others, with the city, and with the empire?

In the end, one finds that Ambrose, a leading figure in an imperial city during the dynamic transformations of the latter half of the fourth century, participated in many changing and developing communal manifestations. As *vir clarissimus* and former *consularis*, Ambrose engaged in Roman governance and, even as bishop, he was sent to bridge the divisions within the imperial community, such as those tensions between emperor and usurper. His many treatises, as well as his hymn writing, established him among the philosophical and literary elite of his time. As bishop, Ambrose served the pastoral needs of his community, such as tending to the poor and offering counsel in matters of personal relationships, and created a network of bishops, who shared advice through letters and met in councils to settle disputes. It is clear, then, that Ambrose built community featuring a diverse and complex blend of religion and philosophy, social networking, politics, patronage, and personal relationships. He engaged with other bishops, vowed women, emperors and their courts, the Senate of Rome, generals and bureaucrats, and cultural elites and merchants. He seems even to have been influential well beyond imperial borders.

This volume presents some of the many ways that Ambrose of Milan sought to form or to recreate community amidst the complex socio-political, cultural, and religious contexts of late antiquity. The conference papers, edited and revised for this publication, nuance our understanding of Ambrose's community-creating efforts by considering his theology, philosophy, Romanness, and Christianity. In their own way, the contributions collected here speak to the transformations of traditional late antique communities, which are sometimes so subtle as to be nearly imperceptible and other times overt and obvious. Concordantly, a reader must wonder whether or not Ambrose deliberately and directly altered or created a community.

The first four papers loosely coordinate in their treatment of Ambrose and his people in the Church, including those outside the empire's borders, patrons and clients, women, and martyrs. The volume begins with **Rita Lizzi Testa**'s detailed chapter on Ambrose's influence abroad and at home.

This historical examination of Ambrose's interactions with people beyond the borders of Empire is a significant reappraisal of the value of ancient sources. Contrasted with his activities in Milan, it sets a contextual framework for Ambrose's overlapping and variously sized spheres of community influence. This macroview of Ambrose's efforts speaks to Roman, Christian, Nicaean, elite, and religious (both clergy and lay) communities.

In a dual historical and theological approach, **Robert Grant** presents Ambrose's effort to reinterpret traditional Roman patronage. Noting Ambrose's elite social status, Grant begins by showing Ambrose to be a typical Roman patron. He then counters this image by presenting the poor as patrons of the wealthy and martyrs as patrons of the faithful. Together, these patrons overturn traditional relationships and re-frame the community both toward the common good and eternal salvation.

Metha Hokke follows with an insightful study of Ambrose's shifting hierarchical relationship with consecrated virgins. Hokke focuses on two treatises, *De virginibus* and *De virginitate*, working through several metaphors and textual exegeses to determine how Ambrose reorganized his ecclesiastical community, with particular emphasis on its vowed women members. Hokke demonstrates how Ambrose initially elevates vowed virginity to the very pinnacle of holiness. Yet, in the end, Ambrose imposes his own episcopal authority over these communities of women, putting himself clearly between this group and God.

Martyrs are the focus of **Francesco Braschi**'s study, which considers how Ambrose invested in these Christian heroes to unite the ecclesial community. Ambrose set their relics in his churches, told their stories in his sermons and hymns, and included them in the liturgy. In other words, the eternal and ubiquitous presence of the martyrs provided a foundation for Ambrose's faith community, both Christian and, more specifically, Nicaean. The effectiveness of this concentration on the martyrs to build a Nicaean community of faith is reflected in their continued presence in hymns and the liturgical calendar well after Ambrose's death and even to the modern era.

The next five papers generally address Ambrose's literary and artistic means of bonding individuals, proposing and promoting a multifaceted aesthetic. **Sr. Maria M. Kiely** recognizes Ambrose's appeal to the spiritual and emotional human depths through poetry. Kiely's exegesis of Ambrose's commentary on the Song of Songs focuses on its image of the Bride to bond his community to Christ the groom. The Song of Songs offered Ambrose an opportunity to tap into notions of Christian beauty, peace, joy, and love, yet still couched somewhat in classical culture. Then, with an interesting

application of this community building to a historical event, Kiely provides a new explanation for the popular support Ambrose garnered in the basilica crisis of Easter, 386 AD.

Ambrose's role as teacher is the subject of **David Vopřada**'s contribution. Vopřada finds Ambrose using the Psalms and David, whom Ambrose believed composed them, to appeal to the audience's sense of beauty. The mystagogical experience of Christ, expressed in the "poetic beauty" of the psalms, "surpasses the capacity of human intelligence." Ambrose, performing his pastoral duties in writing catechetical and exegetical works, focused thus on the mystical and the moral in these psalms. Ambrose's practice of mystagogy is a reflection of Christ's teaching and a primary means of helping his congregation reach a common understanding of the faith.

The next chapter is a posthumous publication by **Angela Christman,** a deeply respected and admired colleague. Her paper astutely recognizes some clever Ambrosian allusions to Virgil's *Aeneid* in his *Expositio Psalmi CXVIII*. Unlike Vopřada's mystagogical approach, the linguistic and literary study reveals Ambrose's more traditional Roman approach to poetry. These references speak especially to the educated elite, eliciting more profound comprehension of the "moral and theological points the bishop was trying to convey." Here, as with Vopřada, one finds Ambrose employing a range of methods to engage an audience of diverse education.

One of Ambrose's most significant legacies to the Church is his corpus of hymns. As part of the conference, five hymns of Ambrose (one spurious) were performed under the direction of Nathan Windt, following new arrangements by William Campbell. **Brian Dunkle**, applying the insights of his excellent *Enchantment and Creed in the Hymns of Ambrose of Milan*, offers here a revision of his paper that opened this concert. Dunkle rightly notes how the singing of hymns unites people simply by virtue of its practice. In other words, singing the same songs together binds individuals. Yet, more careful attention to the lyrics shows that Ambrose sought to link the participants in more specific ways, namely expressing classical and Christian virtues to draw people together and to strengthen ties to the Nicaean church, especially during its contests with homoianism. Dunkle demonstrates too that his hymns continue even now to foster community.

In addressing Ambrose's visual aesthetics, **Ethan Gannaway** examines an overlooked but pervasive aspect of Ambrose's writing. Gannaway gazes intently at a specific passage in Ambrose's *Hexameron*, identifying the application of traditional and secular modes of seeing and understanding art and noting the Ambrosian innovations concerning beauty. Through this aesthetic language, Ambrose urged his viewers to notice the creative powers below the surface of objects and to recognize the divinity of creation and of

its creator, linking them to broader notions of virtues, both classical and Christian. Teaching his people how to see the divine in the world through this Roman and Christian philosophical aesthetic, Ambrose built and reshaped a community of viewers, who saw themselves in God's work in this life and prepared them to see themselves in God's eternal domus in the afterlife.

The next three papers concentrate on the intellectual communities to which Ambrose belonged. Examining how Ambrose links Cicero's virtues to building a Christian community, **Allan Fitzgerald** addresses truth and friendship. Fitzgerald turns his attention to Ambrose's *De officiis* in particular, which is itself the fundamental book concerning the responsibilities required to ensure a successful Christian community. In it and in *exempla* such as David and Job, he finds Ambrose expressing that the search for truth is equivalent to the search for Christ. Thus, Ambrose appears to leave traditional, elite Roman processes of thinking based on Cicero for a Christian one founded on Old Testament virtues.

Similarly, **Anthony Thomas** addresses Ambrose's interest in true wisdom. His argument focuses on Ambrose's critique of philosophers, Cicero in particular, and especially Stoic philosophy. Thomas finds Ambrose promoting faith-based over reason-based wisdom, yet locating a place for the precepts and tenets of the philosophers within his Christian view. From this broader viewpoint, Thomas notes a specific censure of Arianism, which, Ambrose asserts, fails to recognize God's "divinely revealed knowledge."

Ambrose has long been known to have bonded his people together through the development of his Christian ethics. His *De officiis* is a ready example. **J. Warren Smith** provides a careful, interdisciplinary reading of Ambrose's notion of *societas* and especially *misericordia* under the thesis that to build a Christian community, one needs to create a distinctly Christian moral vocabulary. For Ambrose, the combination of justice and generosity (*misericordia*) lay at the foundation of erecting a strong and virtuous Christian community. He contrasts natural law with a distinctly Christian duty and finds in Christ's incarnation the very core of *societas*: loving humanity.

Finally, regarding Ambrose's lasting influence, which Braschi and Dunkle briefly consider, **Giulia Marconi** provides her important research regarding the early reception history of Ambrose. Marconi examines the reappearance of specific phrases and expressions of Ambrose's *De officiis* in the works of Ennodius, and the plan to reform Christian education in Rome by Cassiodorus, who noted this Ambrosian work. Ambrose therefore continued to instruct Christians well after his death and well before he was supposedly rediscovered in the Caroliginian period.

In their own way, each of the authors of this volume probe into ongoing intractable historical and theological debates. Certainly, each chapter is an argument in its own right. Our grouping of complementary chapters provides some initial, if somewhat vague, subthemes. Readers, however, will likely notice other potential assemblages of nonsequential, and potentially conflicting, chapters. Most clearly, perhaps, is how Ambrose's Roman identity and his Christian identity informed his community building. Where does Ambrose stand on the spectrum of Roman and Christian cultures? Was he a more traditional, elite Roman or Christian bishop? Did he seek an even balance between the two? In the end, is he building a Christian community in opposition to a Roman one, making Christian community Roman, or making Roman community Christian? Some of our contributors will emphasize the former, some the latter, and still others hint at a fusion of sorts between the two.

Still other, perhaps less obvious, thematic assemblages can be identified. For example, Ambrose's construction of a local and/or an imperial Christianity offers a religio-political view more in line with typical biographies of the man. Or, in a different way, one might notice that the authors' research falls into various source groups. Some chapters focus on the Hebrew Bible or, more specifically, on the book of Psalms, yet others on Ambrose's *De officiis*. More thematically, one might identify Ambrose and social influence, Ambrose and the arts, Ambrose and philosophy. Education and Ambrose provides yet another example. Just what and how did he teach? And to whom? These subdivisions represent a man that participated in communities that could be independent and dependent, isolated and integrated, preexisting and novel.

Ambrose remains something of an enigma, meaning attempts to understand him are inevitably varied, even eclectic, which permits research originating in a variety of cultural and academic contexts. In fact, one explanation for the ongoing revisions of Ambrose's intentions and goals lies somewhere in the various methodologies of historiography applied to his life. Differences should be expected between, for example, historical theology and theological history, intellectual and religious history, or simply between theology, philosophy, history, linguistics, classics, and other subfields. The sheer volume and diversity of Ambrose's works (approximately twenty-five of which are cited in this volume), in addition to the remains of his Milan, let alone his own career as elite Roman governor and Christian bishop, make this fertile research ground.

This volume does not present the one, true Ambrose, which would be a futile endeavor, but rather highlights the tensions that detailed studies of his thoughts and actions identify, especially through an examination of his

sense of community. Yet, a reasonably coherent image of Ambrose does begin to emerge, even with so many hands painting the picture. Each contributor assembles evidence to shed light on one or another aspect of Ambrose's words and works. The conclusions of one may be challenged by the insights of another. The conversation among the papers constitutes a dynamic engagement of collegial scholars who, not coincidentally, construct their own community. Readers are invited to join the conversation. When assembled together, our authors each make a significant contribution, a beautiful tessara, to a composition of a wide-eyed aristocratic priest who dares us to follow his gaze.

CHAPTER ONE

AMBROSE AND THE CREATION OF A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

RITA LIZZI TESTA

From Milan to the World

When Paulinus was about to write the *Life of St. Ambrose* around 422, he had a serious intention of obeying Augustine, following the *Lives* of other blessed men that the bishop of Hippo had indicated to him as models.[1] The former secretary of Ambrose instead, in writing his biography, moved away

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[1] Paulinus of Milan, *Vita Ambrosii* 1.1, trans. Mary S. Kaniecka (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America, 1928): "You urge, reverend father Augustine, that just as those blessed men, the Bishop Athanasius and the priest Jerome described with their pens the lives of Saint Paul and Anthony who lived in the desert, just as also Severus, a servant of God, composed in elegant language the life of the reverend Martin, Bishop of the Church of Tours, so too, I describe with my pen the life of the blessed Ambrose, Bishop of the Church of Milan." The dating of the *VA* has always oscillated between 412/13 and 422, but despite some decades ago when Émilien Lamirande, "La datation de la *Vita Ambrosii*," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 27 (1981): 44-55, and *Paulin de Milan et la* "Vita Ambrosii:" *Aspects de la religion sous le Bas-Empire* (Paris: Desclée, 1983), 21-24, strongly supported the former date, I think we must accept 422 AD as the year of composition of the work, following the solid arguments put forward by Elena Zocca, "La *Vita Ambrosii* alla luce dei rapporti fra Paolino, Agostino e Ambrogio," in *"Nec timeo mori:" Atti del Congresso internazionale di studi ambrosiani nel XVI centenario della morte di sant'Ambrogio (Milano, 4-11 aprile 1997)*, ed. Luigi Pizzolato and Marco Rizzi (Milan: Bulzoni Editore, 1998), 803-26; Lellia Cracco Ruggini, "Tra Ambrogio e Agostino, tra Milano e l'Africa," *Annali di Studi Religiosi* 2 (2001): 503-17; Marco Navoni, *Paolino di Milano. Vita di Sant'Ambrogio* (*Vetera sed Nova*) (Milan: San Paolo Edizioni, 2016), 50-51.

from them in several aspects.[2] His was the first episcopal biography proper, and Ambrose, who had exercised his charisms on the political scene,[3] had been an exceptional character, so that his fame, uncontainable within the borders of the Empire, had soon gone well over them. Three passages in particular from his *Life of St Ambrose* vividly show what kind of bishop, famous throughout the world, Ambrose was after around fifteen years in this role. Not always, however, is it possible to check the information of this work, although Paulinus reassured the reader that everything he had written was the result of personal testimonies or acquired by highly reliable figures (such as Ambrose's sister).[4] It is therefore necessary to examine these passages, which have scarcely attracted the attention of scholars, since they

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[2] The function performed by Paulinus of Milan seems to have been that of a *notarius*, who evaluated Ambrose's correspondence (*VA* 49) and wrote his treatises under dictation (*VA* 42.1). For the growing importance that the *notarii*, once low-ranking figures, acquired both in the imperial and episcopal chancelleries, see Hans Teitler, Notarii *and* exceptores: *An Inquiry into Role and Significance of Shorthand Writers in the Imperial and Ecclesiastical Bureaucracy of the Roman Empire from the Early Principate to c. 450 A.D.,* (Amsterdam: Brill, 1985); Jean-Michel Carrié, "Notarii." in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. Glen Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 611-12. It is not surprising that Paulinus of Milan passed from the dependencies of a deacon (*VA* 42.39) to the role of deacon himself. It is therefore possible to identify Ambrose's biographer with the deacon Paulinus quoted by Augustine in 418: *De gratia Christi et de peccato originali* II.3; 8; 26 (*PL* 44, 386-389; 397), and Aug., *Ep*. 29 (*CSEL* 88.137-48, ed. Divjak), and with the *Paulinus quidam diaconus* mentioned in *Praedestinatus* 1.88 (*PL* 53, 617) as *defensor et procurator ecclesiae Mediolanensis*, a deacon who took care of the interests of the Milanese Church in Africa.

[3] On the nature of the *VA* as the first episcopal biography proper, see Christine Mohrmann "Zwei frühchristliche Bischofsviten: *Vita Ambrosii, Vita Augustini,"* *Anzeiger der philosophisch-historischen Klasse der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 112 (1975), 307. On the special nature of the Ambrosian charism, see Rita Lizzi Testa, "Tra i classici e la Bibbia: l'*otium* come forma di santità episcopale," in *Modelli di santità e modelli di comportamento: contrasti, intersezioni, complementarietà,* ed. by Giulia Barone, Marina Caffiero, and Francesco Scorza Barcellona (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1994), 43-64; Cracco Ruggini, 2001, 507-17; Rita Lizzi Testa, "Martino vescovo santo: un modello di santità nell'Occidente tardoantico," *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 29 (2008): 317-44.

[4] Paulinus of Milan, *VA* 1.3: in addition to his direct testimony and that of Marcellina, the sister of Ambrose, Paulinus refers to the *probatissimi viri* (men very worthy of trust), who were close to Ambrose before him, and to oral and written sources that he had collected.

give a geographical dimension to the Christian community that the bishop of Milan was building.

Ambrose and the Persians

> At the same time two of the most powerful and wisest men of the Persians, because of the fame of the bishop, came to Milan, bringing with them many questions that thereby they might make trial of the wisdom of the great man, and with him they argued through an interpreter from the first hour of the day until the third hour of the night, and they went away full of wonder. And to show that they had come for no other reason than really to get better acquainted with the man whom they had heard of by report, on the next day bidding farewell to the emperor they set out for the city of Rome, wishing there to become acquainted with the power of the illustrious man Probus; and when they had become acquainted with him, they returned to their own home.[5]

There are various reasons for suspecting this extract of being a biographer's invention. There is the recurrence of a frequent *topos* in the biographies of famous men, in which it was common to introduce figures from distant lands, who undertook long voyages for the sole purpose of meeting them. Furthermore, Paulinus establishes a seemingly rather naive correspondence: as the two Persians were extremely powerful and learned, they wanted to test Ambrose's wisdom in Milan and acquaint themselves with Probus' power in Rome. The writer also excludes the possibility that these men from Persia were ambassadors on an official mission, underlining that they merely wished to pay their respects to the emperor before leaving for Rome and after spending many hours with Ambrose. This also creates such a lack of symmetry between the time given to the bishop, that given to the emperor, and the fleeting visit to the powerful *vir illustris* Probus, as to suggest that the whole story was invented to exalt the bishop.

Though these observations, put together, might lead one to dismiss the episode as implausible, other historical considerations tend to confirm its truth. We need, first of all, to shed light on the date of this journey from distant Persia to Milan and Rome. Paulinus mentions it immediately after describing what had happened in Thessalonica in 390,[6] so that some commentators of the *Vita Ambrosii* have thought that the phrase used to introduce it, *per idem tempus* (in that same period), was intended to place it around 391, when the news of the massacre ordered by Theodosius and

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[5] Paulinus of Milan, *VA* 25.1-2.
[6] Paulinus of Milan, *VA* 24.

Ambrose's reaction to it could even have reached the East.[7] However, as Probus might already have died in the course of 388, it has been suggested that the Latin word *potentia*, which appears at the end of the extract, might have the sense of *domus*, as if the Persians had gone, not to visit him, but his house, the famous *domus Aniciana*.[8]

There is no need to force the text in this way. The term *cognoscere* does not suggest a tourist visit to admire a sumptuous palace, but the desire to question a man about political projects which had brought him so much power. Moreover, Paulinus never uses the expression *per idem tempus* to give a precise chronological indication—something required neither in a biography nor in the *Life* of a saint. "In that same period" is for Paulinus a convenient transitional phrase, frequently used to move from one subject to another and to indicate, by means of a general time reference, that this second event happened more or less "at the same time" as that described above. Just before speaking of Thessalonica, the biographer recounted the episode of Callinicum, which took place in 388.[9] The phrase might, then, have the sense of 'in the same period' as Callinicum. The little village was on the borders of Syria—now ar-Raqqah—from which the news could quickly have reached neighboring Persia (Fig. 1-1). According to Theodoret, if we accept an attractive conjecture by Jean-Remy Palanque, Theodosius exclaimed on the very subject of Callinicum: "Now I know indeed that Ambrose alone has the right to be called a bishop."[10] Only then had the emperor finally understood what a bishop was. Moreover, Theodoret was bishop of Cyrrhus, a city about sixty kilometers from Berea (Aleppo) in Syria. What had happened in 388 in that Syrian settlement and its repercussions in Milan might have aroused no less interest than the meeting between emperor and bishop after the massacre of Thessalonica; in both cases the consequence was an unprecedented confrontation between the Christian bishop and the Roman emperor.

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[7] Michele Pellegrino, *Paolino di Milano: Vita di S. Ambrogio* (Rome: Editrice Studium 1961), 88.

[8] Angelo Paredi, "Paulinus of Milan," *Sacris Erudiri* 14 (1963): 226; cf. Navoni 2016, 121, n. 100.

[9] Paulinus of Milan, *VA* 22-23.

[10] Theodoret, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.18.2: cf. 5.24 (*GCS* N.F. 5, ed. Ch. Hansen, Berlin 1998). For Jean-Remy Palanque, *Saint Ambroise et l'empire romain. Contribution à l'histoire des rapports de l'Église et de l'État à la fin du quatrième siècle* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1933), 220, the sentence that Theodoret attributes to Theodosius could refer to a judgment expressed by the emperor after the confrontation he had in church with Ambrose on the events that occurred at Callinicum.

Obviously, the Christians of the Sasanian Empire were the first to be interested in these facts, but they were not alone in this.[11] Intermittently persecuted for four decades during the reign of Shapur II (309-79), as testified by the so-called *Acts of the Persian Martyrs,*[12] after his death they began to benefit from the détente between the two empires.[13] A peace treaty was signed by Theodosius with Shapur III in 387, ratifying the division of Armenia into a western smaller region under the Eastern Roman Empire and an eastern one entrusted to the Sasanians. That treaty, in particular, improved the conditions of the Christians in the cities of Mesopotamia.[14]

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[11] The Sasanid Empire had a considerable Christian population, many of them captured Romans who were often Christian: Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China. A Historical Survey* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 481-7; Jan Willem Drijvers, "Rome and the Sasanid Empire: Confrontation and Coexistence." in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 445 and 451.

[12] The so-called *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*, which circulated widely west of the frontier as well, were an important medium through which Roman Christians became aware of their cousins in Iran: Elizabeth Key Fowden, "Martyr Cult on the Frontier: The Case of Mayperqat," chap. 2 in *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 45-59. Most of the martyrs gained their crowns during four decades of the reign of Shapur II. Although modern scholarship no longer accepts the idea of a Zoroastrian state church (Drijvers, "Rome and the Sasanid Empire," 444), it is sure that Sasanian kings supported Zoroastrianism and its religious leaders, as the great number of fire-temples that have been found show: Béatrice Caseau, "Sacred Landscapes," in *Late Antiquity. A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. Glen Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 45. Sasanian kings gave Zoroastrianism and its hierarchized priesthood a certain degree of dominion over other religions, in times of internal and political problems.

[13] Michael Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian: Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 202-11, and Drijvers, "Rome and the Sasanid Empire," 446, believe that the relations between the Sasanians and Roman Empire went through three main phases. After the first (226-363) of serious hostilities, the second phase (363-ca. 500) saw only a few conflicts and was characterized by coexistence and cooperation. The third phase (ca. 500-630) was mainly marked by mutual suspicion and warfare.

[14] Arnold H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602. A Social Economic and Administrative Survey* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), 1:158; Arnold H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 224-26, and 444-45, n. 15. The Roman share was by far the smaller, only about one-fifth of the Kingdom of Armenia, and was not brought under the normal provincial system. The hereditary satraps continued to rule their people according to