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Idealised Past and Contested Tradition: Claudian's *Panegyric for the Sixth Consulship of Honorius* and Prudentius' *Contra Symmachum*

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Abstract: This paper focuses on representation of roman tradition in two poems published approximately during the same period, A.D. 403-404. Claudian's pagan vision of the Roman past is an idealisation of Roman tradition, which he proposes that Honorius should imitate. Honorius is to become a new Trajan, and renew for fourth-century Rome the tradition of the *optimus* and *pious princeps*. Prudentius, on the contrary, compiles a list of past Roman vices and failures, and emphasises the moral, cultural and philosophical improvement that is brought by the Christian faith. Honorius becomes one of the models of *christianissimus princeps*. By analysing these opposing propositions, I intend to demonstrate what was an increasingly large gulf between Roman pagan identities, of which Claudian is particularly aware, and the Christian empire, of which Prudentius is the self-proclaimed champion. In fact, the first concern of both poems is how to speak of roman identity in the context of an Empire becoming ever less Roman, where traditional Roman civilization is more and more criticised and put in question by new ways of building identities\*.

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In the winter of 402, the old Roman senator Symmachus began a long and difficult journey to Honorius' court. Even though he was already ill<sup>1</sup> (he died a few weeks later), he wanted to submit to the emperor and his powerful adviser Stilicho what he claimed were "important political questions"<sup>2</sup>. A few weeks or few months later, the Christian poet Prudentius published the final version of a poem in two books against Symmachus<sup>3</sup>. In the first book he mocks and criticizes the odd and pointless superstitions of the old Roman religion, while in the second book he focuses his criticism on a text published by Symmachus eighteen years earlier, the famous *Relatio*, concerning the removal of the altar of Victory from the Roman Senate<sup>4</sup>.

Many hypotheses have been propounded to explain this strange correlation between what seems to be a merely political affair (Symmachus' mission vis-à-vis Honorius) and the religious topics, which are the main subject of the poem<sup>5</sup>. But none of these hypotheses is very convincing. It is very unlikely, for example, that Symmachus would have spoken of the purpose of his journey in such terms if it had only been a new development of the Victory affair, or, as Prudentius seems to believe, if the conflict only concerned the removal of gladiators from official festivals<sup>6</sup>. Yet, how, then, can we explain the poem if Symmachus' mission had no religious content (see, for instance, 2.910, in which the word *legati* (ambassador) obviously means Symmachus<sup>7</sup>)? If we consider just these two elements, no convincing solution can be found. But, if we replace these events (both journey and poem) in their immediate political context, there is perhaps a way of explaining them by enlarging the view to one of a conflict between two opposite conceptions of Roman politics and Roman tradition, and, hence, of Roman past and Roman identity.

Another poem, written barely few months later, but by a pagan writer, Claudian's panegyric for Honorius sixth consulate (404, poem written during the winter of 403<sup>8</sup>) throws

new light on this particular point. We may assume that the conflict during these months is not a religious but a political one and that religion is only a pretext to incriminate Symmachus.

In the following paper, I'll discuss first the conceptions of past in the poems, then I'll focus on the figure of the emperor Theodosius, and discuss his links to Roman traditions in both poems. I will conclude with a series of hypotheses about the reasons that led to a renewal of the cultural, political and religious conflict between pagans and Christians in 403-404.

## ***1-Contested Tradition and Idealised Past, two opposite points of view.***

### ***1.1-Prudentius and the darkness of Roman past.***

In his poem against Symmachus, Prudentius seems to go back to the *topoi* used in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century by the earlier Christian apologists against Roman traditional religion<sup>9</sup>.

The place of the past in the poem is very important and it is almost always described in an negative way. A major proportion of the words used to describe the past is clearly connected with pejorative terms: for example in book 1, *antiquus* qualifies *morbus* (1.2), *luis* and *squalor* (1.7 *squalere*), *priscum tempus* is connected with *ineptia* (1.145 *illo tempore*) and *mos patrius* with *error* (1.155), *uetus* with *nugae* (1.433), *errores* (1.507) and *superstitio* (1.39). Non pejorative uses of these terms are rare and limited to Roman moral best achievements (*Catonis* 1.545) which are nevertheless discussed and criticized in book 2<sup>10</sup>. According to Prudentius, who makes much use of earlier apologists, the ancient Romans were stupid and rough savages who, because of their lack of culture and civilization, were ready to believe the most incredible tales and, according to evhemerist theories, to make gods from powerful or famous men (see 1.42-58, 102-115 *etc.*): “With such power in those days did the ignorant, silly, stupid rabble accredit any king that a ruler could pass with all his uncleanness to an endless kingdom in the heart of heaven? At that time men believed that kingly power, however small, possessed the strength of all majesty and the government of all the heaven,

and leaders had honour paid to them with incense on a little shrine. Fear or love or hope kept adding to it, and the inherited tradition went marching on among wretched men to distant ages, the false semblance of piety spreading through succeeding generations whose ignorant minds were clouded in a mist of error”<sup>11</sup>.

Such stupid tales should have been removed when Romans became more refined and when they heard about philosophy and science, but they were not, mostly because the Romans never seriously inquired into sciences and preferred the oddities of their religion to philosophical and religious truth: “Happy had they been had they known that all their successes were ordered by the governance of God Christ! (...) But they made sacrifice of their darkened, blinded souls in the sanctuaries of Jupiter and Augustus, the temples of the two Junos, the shrines of Mars and Venus, and plunged them into the full abyss of death, supposing supreme power to reside in the gross parts of the world and to be established in the sunken depths of the universe”<sup>12</sup>.

Many centuries later, according to the poet, Christian emperors forced them to give up their foolish superstitions and embrace the true religion. Most of them did so enthusiastically, but a few, especially among the old senatorial aristocracy, preferred the darkness of error to the light of truth. Thus the decayed paganism remains only among these fool senators, and the progress of the whole city towards truth and true science is slowed down only by the shame of past errors: “taught by such proclamations, Rome withdrew from her long-standing errors and shook the murky clouds from her aged face, her nobles ready now to essay the everlasting ways, to follow Christ at the call of their great-hearted leader, and cast their hopes into eternity... Look at the illustrious chamber wher sit nation’s luminaries: hardly will you find a few minds beset with pagan vanities and clinging feebly to their suppressed worships, who would keep the darkness that has been banished and refuse to see the noon-day brightness of the sun”<sup>13</sup>.

Such a picture is obviously too caricatured to be considered as other than mere provocation. Prudentius knows, as we know, that Roman paganism, especially among senatorial aristocracy, can be neither confounded with the stupid superstitions he describes, nor despised as being contrary to real knowledge. Philosophers like Marius Victorinus came from Platonism to the Christian faith and everything we know about late cultivated paganism is inconsistent with Prudentius' picture in his first book<sup>14</sup>, and it is not surprising that in the second book the poet makes adjustments and analyzes Symmachus' philosophical and political arguments more calmly<sup>15</sup>. At the same time, however, the number of the senators who, according to Prudentius, enthusiastically embraced the Christian faith is certainly overestimated; and the truth is that a great part (perhaps the majority) of the Roman Senate remained pagan at this time<sup>16</sup>.

Therefore, there is something strange and certainly something unexpressed in this bias against the Roman Past, especially if we remember how important the *mos maiorum*, the ancestral tradition, was for the Romans. This *mos maiorum* is systematically mocked by the poet as a proof of intellectual failure in front of the Christian truth: "in such wise has the observance grown ; starting in an evil hour long ago from our forefathers it was then handed on to the generations that followed and carried further by their remote descendants<sup>17</sup>" and again from Theodosius' mouth: "I shall not suffer thee, while I am thy leader, to hold to old idle notions, nor to worship decayed monstrosities of gods". The reason why Prudentius so directly criticizes Roman tradition is that, for him, the true Roman empire can only be the Christian empire that Constantine and his successors have created. The number of Christian senators (obviously exaggerated by the poet who can only give very few names) is less important than the fact itself: the last place where pagans aristocrats could interfere with Roman progress will certainly become within a few years a Christian place. Such an affirmation is obviously easier to confirm if Symmachus, the most powerful and influential

member of the Roman Senate and a resolute pagan, is now dead. Symmachus' death (of which Prudentius doesn't say a word, though it probably occurred while he was finishing his poem) can thus be interpreted as a first sign of victory for Christian progress in Rome<sup>18</sup>. The gap between archaic superstitions and modern enlightenment created by Constantine and his Christian successors until Theodosius the Great and his devout sons is, in Prudentius' conception of the past, the sign of a renewal of the Roman people who finally get rid of the decayed traditions of his pagan past.

### ***1.2-Claudian, the old and the new: continuities in Roman tradition.***

What we read in Claudian's panegyric is, on the contrary, much more consistent with Roman traditional conceptions of the Past. There are actually very few mentions of the past in the panegyric, but this is not surprising if we consider that, from Claudian's point of view, there is no gap between past and present time, because what the Romans can see with their own eyes when Honorius comes to Rome in January 404 is nothing else than a perfect reproduction of the traditional ceremony of the *adventus Augusti*<sup>19</sup>. Let us read the first lines of the poem: "if the ancestors vowed temples to home-bringing Fortune in honour of the return of their generals, never would the goddess more worthily claimed for her services a noble temple than when their proper majesty *is restored (reparatur)* alike to the consulship and to Rome"<sup>20</sup>.

If we compare this text to Prudentius' poem, the attitude towards the past is exactly the opposite: for Prudentius, the past is (with few exceptions) nothing but a time of errors and roughness, and the present is praised as Rome's first step towards progress and truth. In Claudian's poem, by contrast, the Romans can find in their past a perfect pattern of what Roman rulers should now do when they come to Rome. There is an organic link between best Roman political achievements and the just beginning reign of the young Honorius<sup>21</sup>. Rome

always welcome a good prince who efficiently protects and serves her glory: “the desire to see their Prince burns fiercer and inflames both senators and people, demanding the visit so often denied; it was not with harmony such as this, or so our ancestors relate, that the people's prayers grew fervent throughout the City, when Trajan, mighty in war, had broken the armies of Dacia and brought the indignant North beneath his sway, at that time when the rods of Roman power encircled Hypanis and when the land of Lake Maeotis gazed in wonderment at our laws and stood astounded by the sight of a Roman tribunal *etc*”<sup>22</sup>. So, the best Roman tradition requires a good emperor to accept Romans’ praise and to consider the old city as the place where he received his legitimacy and power: “Here dwelt those heroes whom virtue, recognizing virtue, chose and by adoption giving them their name for the benefit of Rome continued a noble dynasty through judgement and not through blood; here lived the Aelian clan that traced its ancestry back to Nerva, here too the peace-loving family of Pius and the warrior scions of Severus. Citizen as you are, deign to enter this company”<sup>23</sup>.

However, since there ought to be no gap between past and present times, Claudian severely condemns innovations initiated by emperors during the 4<sup>th</sup> century as tyrannical and non-Roman forms of government. To some extent, this breach in Roman tradition is also symptomatic of a failure of Roman government<sup>24</sup> : “in all these years, which I number at twice ten lustres, three times have I seen an Emperor within my sacred boundary; the times were different, but the reason for their victory was the same, and it was civil war. In their arrogance they came, no doubt, that I might see their chariots bespattered with the blood of Romans. Could any man think that for a loving mother the lamentations of her sons were cause for joy? Usurpers they were who died, but when they died, still they were mine”.

Claudian points to a decisive change in Roman administration that has caused trouble and broken a secular tradition. By the same token, renewing a tradition that produced the best



emperors is the best way to restore Roman universal power. What was a progress towards truth in Prudentius' poem, is in Claudian the obvious sign of decline of Roman ideals.

If we confine our discussion to these preliminary remarks, it is difficult to find any common point between both poems or even to compare them. Yet, in fact, as different as they seem to be, they have so many common themes that Claudian's work can be cautiously described as an answer to Prudentius' claims for Roman renewal by the Christian faith. The most important argument in this discussion is the picture both poems give of Theodosius, whom Christians regarded as the new Constantine and as the *christianissimus princeps*.

## ***2-Theodosius, a new Trajan or a new Constantine?***

The exact valuation of Theodosius' reign was apparently as difficult for ancient historians as it is for modern scholars. Depending on their religious faith or their political involvement, Theodosius is either regarded as a saint who saved Rome from the pagan usurper, closed the temples of false gods and really transformed Rome into a Christian empire, or, alternatively, blamed for having introduced into the Roman army more barbarians than had any other prince before him, as well as for his brutality towards his opponents and his leniency towards a corrupt and inefficient administration. Furthermore such praise and blame can occur within the same work, showing how difficult it was for people who knew about the disastrous reigns of Theodosius' incompetent sons to give an impartial account of their father's government<sup>25</sup>.

Theodosius is cited as an example in both poems, but the picture that the poets give is so different that we may assume that, at the outset of Arcadius' and Honorius' principates<sup>26</sup>, this emperor and his policies are in fact the central factor in Christian and pagan attitudes towards the past. There is at least one thing in common between the pagan and the Christian poet: Theodosius' moral stature is for the young Honorius the reference-point on which he has

to base his own policy. However, as to what this policy must actually be, the poets as expected completely disagree. Since Prudentius provides the most unsurprising picture of Theodosius' reign, we will discuss this representation first. Prudentius portrays Theodosius as the emperor who, after Constantine's decisive conversion, has worked hardest for the Christianization of the Roman Empire. Prudentius highlights his well-known laws against pagan ceremonies and cults to draw the picture of a resolute anti-pagan emperor: "did the illustrious father of his country and ruler of the world achieve nothing, then, when he forbade old error to believe in shapes of gods...? He was the one man whose care it was that, while the wounds in the nation's character showed outwardly a scar lightly healed on the skin, the union of surface should not, because of the surgeon's dishonesty foster in secret a deep-seated wasting sore, all eaten away with putrefaction"<sup>27</sup>. The metaphor of surgery, though it implies a kind of violence done to the Roman body<sup>28</sup>, impressively describes the care that was taken by the emperor to heal his city<sup>29</sup>. Now Honorius must show his devotion to God and to his father by removing gladiators' exhibitions and confirming the withdrawal of any public support to the Vestals<sup>30</sup>: "See, has not your father's merit left this space unoccupied, and God and your sire's kindly affection kept it for you to fill up?" If we relate these piece of advice to Prudentius' attitude towards the Past, Honorius must be as great a reformer as his father has been, and he must go on renewing the empire and suppressing shameful remains of the pagan past. Prudentius aims to draw continuity from Constantine's innovations to Honorius, but this continuity is based on a complete rejection of previous Roman history. By attacking the Vestals, one of the most ancient and venerable cults of Rome, Prudentius strikes a direct blow at the heart of Roman religion, because the sacred fire of which the Vestals took care, represented the beginning of Roman history and religious tradition<sup>31</sup>. Near the end of his treatise, Prudentius closes his attacks by reminding Honorius of what exactly his father's purpose was: the complete and final destruction of Roman pagan past and identity<sup>32</sup>.

Claudian's attitude is the exact opposite: if Theodosius is a model for Honorius, it is only because he was the first emperor of modern times who behaved, both in political and religious affairs, as a man of the ancient time. He restored the rule of a single emperor over the whole Roman world, yet nevertheless behaved as a simple citizen; he granted the Senate a role in his government; he visited the temples and sacred places in Rome<sup>33</sup>; and he restored an ancient form of government, whose antiquity is the best guarantee of the eternity of Roman Empire: "Best as he was of all the gods, he never achieved anything more felicitous in all his life than that he spent his time as victor under the walls of Romulus with you at his side, when, adding his name to the roll-call of the nobler princes, he played the part of citizen, all terror far removed, enduring the exchange of jests with the people and the raillery that they love, enduring too to lay aside the haughtiness of rank and deign to visit in every quarter the houses of senators and the doors of ordinary subjects"<sup>34</sup> and: "now Tiber in a single man sees united both Brutus' consular robe and Quirinus' sceptre. The Pallantean hill rejoices in the sight, after so many ages gone, of a consul; the rostra recognize the curule chair our forefathers heard of so long ago, and, though this is a spectacle grown unfamiliar, the royal lictors with their gilded rods of office now surround the Forum of Trajan"<sup>35</sup>. Honorius erases, when he comes to Rome as a fellow citizen, the past errors of tyrants who came to Rome as all-powerful rulers would have entered a conquered city. Obviously, Claudian, when he wrote these lines, was thinking of such events as Constantius' *adventus* satirized by Ammianus<sup>36</sup>. According to Claudian, the consequences of Theodosius' and Honorius' *pietas* are obvious: a few years after Theodosius visit to Rome, Gildo's secession has found its punishment; a few months before Honorius' visit, Roman troops have halted Alaric's invasion. The inference is very clear: as long as Roman emperors show the traditional *pietas* to Rome, the Senate, the people and the gods, the Roman empire will be quiet and enjoy peace and prosperity.

In this praise of Roman pagan tradition, there is a point that is worth stressing: Claudian seems to condemn (though obviously only implicitly) the dynastic succession of emperors, when he praises the best emperors of the past: “Here dwelt those heroes whom virtue, recognizing virtue, chose and by adoption giving them their name for the benefit of Rome continued a noble dynasty through judgment and not through blood<sup>37</sup>; here lived the Aelian clan that traced its ancestry back to Nerva, here too the peace-loving family of Pius and the warrior scions of Severus”. In Claudian’s mind, there seems to be a link between automatic dynastic succession and corruption of power. It implies that Honorius will not be a good emperor simply because he is the son of an emperor, but rather because he will be able to imitate the best examples of the past. Emperors of the 4<sup>th</sup> century who attained power only by dynastic succession are once more put aside<sup>38</sup>. And Claudian concludes his panegyric in the most provocative way, alluding unmistakably to Prudentius’ refutation of Symmachus’ report: Honorius is the emperor “whose cradle the Senate House has cherished, one, at last, that the citizens of Rome were first to see, one born of auspicious Victory now that Wars are vanquished”<sup>39</sup>.

Let us summarize this second part of our discussion: two opposite models of imperial rule clearly appear, in which religious matters are only a part of a global conception of history. In the pagan view, Roman traditions, because they maintain the link with the glorious past of Rome and the virtues of old Romans, are the best way to protect the empire and ensure its eternity: time is in a way abolished by a circular conception in which the idealized past must be reproduced. In the Christian view, by contrast, history is linear, as it is in the Biblical scheme, proceeding from the darkness of the beginnings to an enlightened future. The progress from the city of men to the city of God is transposed onto Roman history. In this context, Prudentius historical and political manifesto is only a part of a wider project including in other poems the story of sinful humanity liberated by God (*Hamartigeneia* and

*Apotheosis*) and the story of each soul fighting against vices and in order to reach Christian virtues (*The Pscyhomachy*).

However, a question remains unsolved: why did two major Roman poets deal with these crucial political and religious questions at precisely the same time? As we said in the beginning of this paper, what is generally invoked to explain this fact is a renewed crisis between pagans and Christians about pagan cults. This is probably true, but is it sufficient to explain either Prudentius' violence against a senator who is probably dead, or Claudian's insistence on traditional Roman rule and traditional *pietas*? I would like to propose other explanations in which religion is only a part of a wider debate about imperial policies and in which Roman/Christian identities are bound up intimately with the events of the years 402-403. If these hypotheses are right, Prudentius' treatise and Claudian's poem could show us what we can usually only perceive dimly in Late Antiquity because of the lack of information: detailed traces of a true and violent political debate inside the Court.

### ***3-Few hypotheses about pagan-Christian controversy about tradition and its political background<sup>40</sup>.***

In the conclusion of the first book against Symmachus, Prudentius praises Theodosius for not having removed pagans from the Roman Senate after his victory on Eugenius, and for even having promoted pagans like Symmachus to the highest ranks: "and our good leader, requiting earthly services with equal rewards gives to the worshippers of idols a share of the highest dignities, allows them to vie with the repute of their families, and forbids not to men who are still in the coils of paganism a career in the topmost wordly ranks when they have deserved them"<sup>41</sup>. This policy has been analyzed by many recent studies, and there is no doubt that Theodosius tried to win over pagan senators' support by granting them political favours<sup>42</sup>. This attempt to recreate *concordia civilis* must not be overestimated, especially if we keep in

mind that the first consuls appointed by Theodosius himself after his victory over Eugenius, Olybrius and Probinus, were both Christian. In fact, Theodosius did not purge the Senate and the administration of pagans, rather than he granted pagans with special honours. When Prudentius reminds Symmachus of these favours eight years later, it sounds like a reminder of a deal. The favours that Theodosius gave to pagans implied they will support, not undermine, the Christian way of ruling the empire, but many elements show that Stilicho, who needed the financial and economical support of the great pagan families, had tried to asecure a renewed support from pagans by promoting a conservative political line in accordance with the ideal of past Roman emperors<sup>43</sup>. Not later than in 398, in his panegyric for Honorius' fourth consulate Theodosius' words, inspired by Seneca's treatise *on Clemency*, were a clear manifesto of traditional Roman rule, based on *pietas* (without any Christian meaning here), *clementia*, and *libertas*<sup>44</sup>. Two years later, in 400, Stilicho himself came to Rome to inaugurate his consulship, and Claudian in the opening lines of his third book on Stilicho's consulship portrayed the generalissimo as a new Scipio, triumphant over the new Hannibal and told Rome to "honour... the consul who has restored its dignity to the consulship"<sup>45</sup>. Inaugurating the consulship in Rome was quite an unexpected return to tradition. Since the imperial court no longer resides in Rome, new consuls used to go to the court and inaugurate their consulship in front of the emperor and a delegation of Roman senators. All these elements are in my opinion proofs that Stilicho tried to promote a Roman traditional conception of imperial rule and, in order to win the support of pagan senators and perhaps of the numerous Italian pagans, tried to separate Honorius' personal faith from official ceremonies whose pagan character he intended to save or restore. This point is very important for a fair valuation of Stilicho's policy during these years. The regent was probably aware that Roman conceptions of imperial power as a sacred rule were almost incompatible with Christian faith and that the idea of a *Christianissimus princeps* promoted by Constantine and his successors (excepting

Julian) could be (as Romans have seen during Eugenius' usurpation) a danger for the *concordia civilis*<sup>46</sup>. Even though Stilicho and Honorius were personally devout Christians, they had to take into account the particular forms and the origins of Roman imperial power, which were undoubtedly related to paganism.

If this hypothesis is right, we can understand why reopening the old contest was so urgent for Prudentius. The Christian aristocracy favoured by Theodosius and Honorius might lose some of the prominent position it had received, not only because Stilicho wanted to use the large resources of the pagan aristocracy for his own policy, but also because the regent had perceived a failure in the Christian conception of Roman power and tried to find a solution that was unacceptable for radical Christians. We know from later writers that Stilicho had many enemies both among Christians and among pagans who were criticizing his expensive policy, but we also know that later historians blamed Stilicho and his family for religious reasons. One text can be quoted as an element of proof. In his history against pagans, Orosius (7.38), few years later, declared that: "count Stilicho, sprung from the Vandals, an unwarlike, greedy, treacherous, and crafty race, thinking it of little consequence that he ruled under the emperor, struggled in every way, as it is generally reported, to place in power his son, Eucherius, who, already from boyhood and in private life, had been planning the persecution of Christians"<sup>47</sup>. As inconsistent as the mention of Eucherius' ambition may be, everything in this account seems to be an echo of anti-stilichonian Christian propaganda and an echo of how radical Christians perceived Stilicho's policies. The fact that Stilicho himself was a Christian and that his wife Serena was fairly devout must lead us to consider these religious attacks as a way of hiding the true division between Christians and Stilicho and confounding two readings of Stilichonian policy, one based on the demands made by the regent to support his wars and the other based on the suspicion Stilicho had raised among Christians concerning imperial rule. Concerning the first reading, Stilicho's policy against

barbarians involved few battles but many financial agreements. This was very expensive and senators were the first ones invited to contribute thereto. That is probably the real reason why Symmachus came to Rome: to cut a new deal with Stilicho, part of which could be a more tolerant religious policy. To such a radical Christian as Prudentius (and that was the second possible reading of the regent's policies), this was undoubtedly a political mistake, a breach in Roman progress towards Christianity, and, incidentally, a sin. Claudian, who is both an unconditional supporter of Stilicho's policy and a sincere pagan, cannot let Prudentius' attacks go unanswered. On the occasion of Honorius consulship in 404 (obviously a political choice coming from Stilicho), he answered with a manifesto containing the most traditional Roman conception of power.

To conclude these remarks, the links between the past and Roman identities in these texts are extremely complex. There are in fact three ways of reading Prudentius' poem and Claudian's panegyric together, and consequently three conceptions of Roman identities. According to a mere religious point of view, Prudentius and Claudian documented one of the last phases of the fight between a more and more radical anti-pagan Christian elite and the last supports of late philosophical paganism. Even more than a theological one, this fight seems to have been philosophical and political. As Symmachus suggested in 384, pagans and Christian could live in a mutual tolerance, and be something like two bases of imperial power. Prudentius refutes this collaboration, pointing out that Roman identity, such as it has been defined by traditional Roman paganism, is incompatible with Christian faith. To become a Christian Roman means not only to change one's mind but also to change one's old identity to a new one. Claudian's answer refutes this statement by invoking the ethnical and historical nature of Roman identity: being a Roman is not a matter of religious faith. Romans are really Roman when they are aware of a tradition coming from the origins of the city and making



them members of a collectivity that transcends history. Bad emperors' military and political failures cannot be used as proofs of Roman religious errors; they are evidence that when Romans lose their link to this moral and civic tradition they become weak and evil. In the political context of the beginning 5<sup>th</sup> century, there was a place for such a debate, because the western Christian emperor was too weak to impose a personal political line, as Theodosius had done sometimes with brutality. Stilicho, who ruled the West in the name of Honorius and apparently according to Theodosius' will, was in fact the centre of this polemic, not merely because he was a Christian who had won important victories against barbarians, but also because in order to keep his power he needed the support of all the Roman forces. To win this support, he had to cooperate with pagans, and hence to question the change of identity that Prudentius considered as the most important element of progress towards a Christian Rome. There is no doubt that the answer given in 404 by Claudian's last imperial panegyric helped to alienate more Christians, and to weaken Stilicho's political position, as we can see in Orosius' account: for Christians, Stilicho was now a barbarian who tried to rule the empire by gaining the favours of pagans and so the true supports of the emperor could only be loyal Christians who tirelessly worked to undermine Stilicho's evil influence on Honorius. It would only take four years before Honorius granted them what they wanted: the head of Stilicho, who was, according to various points of view that historians gave soon after his death, the last of the Romans or the first of a long series of barbarian adventurers trying to rule the Roman Empire.

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<sup>1</sup> Symm., 5.96 to Helpidius: *Romam redisse me nuntio; utinam sanitatis quoque meae index esse potuissem, quam labefactavit peregrinationis iniuria et hiemalis asperitas* (I inform you that I am back to Rome. I wish I could give you good news about my health, which altered both difficulties of the journey and the roughness of the winter...).

<sup>2</sup> Symm. 4.9 (402) to Stilicho: *Cum sublimi excellentia tua legationem mihi amplissimus ordo mandavit, ad quam suscipiendam me et necessitas impulit patriae et tui culminis prouocavit auxilium* (In accordance to your Grace's will, the noblest Senate chose me for an embassy, that I decided to undertake because of the dangers of our country and of the support of Your Greatness). Callu 1982, 237 understands *patriae* as “our city” and refutes all kind of religious content, but this interpretation is unconvincing. According to Helpidius letter (quoted in Symm. 5.94), Callu considers that the senator's main purpose was to get supplies for the city of Rome, but this can be only a part of a more general request, concerning partly religious matters. See also Symm. 7.13 (402) to his son: *Spero etiam legationem breui in notitiam diuini principis perferendam; siquidem uir cuncta praecelsus, cui primas partes causae publicae noster ordo mandavit, mox cum praesidiis ualidissimis adfore nuntiatur*. (I hope that my report will be soon delivered to our divine emperor; for one announces that the most illustrious man to whom the Senate gave the first place to defend our state will soon be here with strongest defenders). Stilicho was in fact in Rhaetia, assembling troops against Alaric.

<sup>3</sup> Callu 1972, 11 speaks of an « oraison funèbre autant que réquisitoire ». In fact, there is no part in Prudentius' poem for funeral praises, probably because, even dead, Symmachus remained dangerous for the Christian as a symbol of pagan culture.

<sup>4</sup> It seems very likely that what we know today as a single poem in two books is in fact the last version of an earlier poem, or at least the final edition of fragments written from 384 to 402. Barnes 1976 and Barnes & Westhall 1991 (especially 59-60) discuss the various opinions concerning the dates of different fragments of the poem (see also Rohman 2003, 238 n. 21). Despite of these complicated origins, the poem published in 402 or 403 must be considered as one work and not two or more (Döpp 1986). My opinion is that Prudentius elaborated

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most part of his poem during the years 385-395, when relations between pagans and Christians were very difficult. But, perhaps because of Theodosius' victory on Eugenius and the final triumph of a Christian prince, the poem was not edited, though it could have been diffused in private circles. When, in 402, the Christian party felt some alteration in the emperor's determination against paganism, the poet completed and published his work. Barnes 1976, 386 gives rather convincing explanations for this late but impressive publication: "it may be possible to detect a political strengthening of the pagan cause at precisely this juncture. In the winter of 401/2 the prefect of the city was Macrobius Longinianus (*CIL* VI. 1188-90), a supporter of Stilicho and a correspondent of Augustine, who built a baptistery while prefect (*ILCV* 92). By 6 December 402 this Christian prefect had been replaced by Caecina Decius Albinus (*CTh* 7.13.15), whose paganism stands documented in the pages of Macrobius (*Sat.* 1.1.7 ff.)". Connections between Symmachus' mission, the appointment of a new and pagan prefect, and Prudentius' poem seem quite obvious.

<sup>5</sup> Rohman 2003, 237.

<sup>6</sup> Prud. *C. Symm.* 2.1110-1132. Concerning gladiators, see Theodoret, *Hist. Eccles.* 5.26. : Ὠνόριος μὲν γὰρ ὁ τῆς Εὐρώπης τὴν βασιλείαν δεξάμενος τὰς ἐν Ῥώμῃ πάλαι γιγνομένας μονομαχίας κατέλυσεν, ἀφορμὴν τοιάνδε λαβὼν. (Honorius, who inherited the empire of Europe, put a stop to the gladiatorial combats which had long been held at Rome). This measure probably took place in 404. About similar measures in the Eastern part, see *CTh*.2.8.20 (392) and *CTh*.2.8.23 (399).

<sup>7</sup> Prud. *C. Symm.* 2.760-765 : *Nil te permoueat magni uox rhetoris oro, / qui sub legati specie sacra mortua plorans / ingenii telis et fandi uiribus audet / heu nostram temptare fidem nec te uidet ac me / deuotos, auguste, deo cui sordida templa / clausimus et madidas sanie deiecimus aras* (Let not the voice of the great orator prevail on thee, I pray, when under the guise of a deputy he bemoans the fate of rites that are dead, and with all the weapons of his mind and power of speech, dares, alas! to attack our faith, not seeing that thou and I, Augustus, are vowed to God in whose honour we have closed the foul temples and cast down the blood-soaked altars). For Prudentius' translations, see Thomson 1962.

<sup>8</sup> The poem was probably recited on 1<sup>st</sup> January 404, in Rome. Claudian wrote it during the last months of 403. Even if Prudentius published his poem between the battle of Pollentia and the battle of Verona and not later (Barnes 1976), Claudian began his own work less than eighteen months after Prudentius' publication and the poems might be quite contemporaneous. Barnes 1976 considers that Prudentius published his poem between the battles, because there is no reference to the battle of Verona, but the date of this late battle is unclear (perhaps

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during the summer of 403). Furthermore there are echoes of Claudian's *Bellum Geticum* (written just after Pollentia, during the spring and summer of 402) in Prudentius' poem.

<sup>9</sup> Especially Lactantius and Arnobius. See Lavarenne 1963 and Rohman 2003, 249-250.

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of Prudentius' opinions towards pagan gods see now Rohman 2003 especially 248-253.

<sup>11</sup> Prud. *C. Symm.* 1.145-155: *Tantum posse omnes illo sub tempore reges / indocilis fatui ducebat ineptia uulgi / ut transire suis cum sordibus induperator / posset in aeternum caeli super ardua regnum. / Regia tunc omnis uim maiestatis et omnis, / parua licet, caeli imperium retinere potestas / credita; tunc etiam ducibus paruo que sacello / inperitus honos, quem dum metus aut amor aut spes / adcumulant, longum miseris processit in aeuum / mos patrius. Coepit falsae pietatis imago / ire per ignaros nebuloso errore nepotes.*

<sup>12</sup> Prud. *C. Symm.* 1.287-296: *felices, si cuncta deo sua prospera christo / principe disposita scissent!... / sed caligantes animas et luce carentes / in iouis augusti que adytis templis que duarum / iunonum martis que etiam veneris que sacellis / mactatas taetro leti inmersere baratro / supremum regimen crassis in partibus orbis / esse rati merso que poli consistere fundo.*

<sup>13</sup> Prud. *C. Symm.* 1.506-510 and 573-577: *Talibus edictis urbs informata refugit / errores ueteres et turbida ab ore uieto / nubila discussit iam nobilitate parata / aeternas temptare uias christum que uocante / magnanimo ductore sequi et spem mittere in aeuum... Respice ad inlustrem lux est ubi publica cellam, / uix pauca inuenies gentilibus obsita nugis / ingenia obtritos aegre retinentia cultus / et quibus exactas placeat seruare tenebras / splendentem que die medio non cernere solem.*

<sup>14</sup> See for example Chuvin 2003, Barnes & Westhall 1991.

<sup>15</sup> The differences between book 1 and book 2 are, as we have seen above, so important that many scholars have defended the idea of two separate books elaborated in one poem. But see Döpp 1986.

<sup>16</sup> Barnes & Westhall 1991.

<sup>17</sup> Prud. *C. Symm.* 1.240-244: *Sic obseruatio creuit / ex atauis quondam male coepta, deinde secutis / tradita temporibus seris que nepotibus aucta. / Traxerunt longam corda inconsulta catenam / mos que tenebrosus uitiosa in saecula fluxit.*

<sup>18</sup> Such an analysis is strange for our modern taste, but there was a Roman tradition that allowed and even encouraged such critics on recently dead persons. The most famous example is Seneca's *Apocoloquintosis*. Juvenal comically confirms this fact when his violent but a bit coward satirist exclaims (1.170-171): "I'll try what can be said against those whose ashes the Flaminian and Latin roads cover" (*experiar quid concedatur in*

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*illos quorum Flaminia tegitur cinis atque Latina*). See Delignon 2008, 451-452 with bibliography included in notes 28 and 29.

<sup>19</sup> Concerning ceremony of *adventus* see Dufraigne 1991. Mac Cormick 1990, 35-64 points to a renewal of imperial ceremony of triumph under Honorius. See in particular the pages about *calcatio* as a new part of the ceremony. These innovations might have been included in a kind of restoration of traditional imperial ceremonies.

<sup>20</sup> Claud. 6 Honor. 1-5: *Aurea Fortunae Reduci si templa priores / Ob reditum vovere ducum, non dignius umquam / Haec dea pro meritis amplas sibi posceret aedes, / Quam sua cum pariter trabeis reparatur et urbi / Maiestas.*

<sup>21</sup> In the panegyric for his third consulship (396), the boy Honorius was praised for the deeds of his father and his future achievements, in the panegyric for his fourth consulship (398), Theodosius lectured the young prince about the rules of wise government.

<sup>22</sup> Claud. 6 Honor. 334-338: *nec tali publica vota / Consensu tradunt atavi caluisse per urbem, / Dacica bellipotens cum fregerat Vlpium arma / Atque indignantes in iura redegerat Arctos, / Cam fasces cinxere Hypanin mirataque leges / Romanum stupuit Maeotia terra tribunal.* I use M. Dewar's translations (=Dewar 1996).

<sup>23</sup> Claud. 6 Honor. 417-422: *Hic illi mansere viri, quas mutua virtus / Legit et in nomen Romanis rebus adoptans / Iudicio pulchram seriem, non sanguine duxit; / Hic proles atavum deducens Aelia Nervam / Tranquillique Pii bellgrotesque Severi. / Hunc civis dignare chorum.*

<sup>24</sup> Claud. 6 Honor. 392-399 : *His annis, qui lustra mihi bis dena recensent, / Nostra ter Augustos intra pomeria vidi, / Temporibus variis; eadem sed causa tropaei / Civilis dissensus erat. Venere superbi, / Scilicet ut Latio respersos sanguine currus / Adspicerem! Quisquamne piaae laetanda parenti / Natorum lamenta putet? periere tyranni, / Sed nobis periere tamen.* The last sentence is unclear. Dewar's translation is probably right ("even they were my children" in Platnauer 1922). About political irony of the phrase *uenere superbi*, see the following part of this paper.

<sup>25</sup> See Jones 1990, 169.

<sup>26</sup> Honorius was created Augustus in 393 and associated to his father, while Arcadius, who had been created Augustus ten years before, was also associated with Theodosius. It is hard to believe that the emperor made such a decision for other reasons than dynastic continuity, expecting for himself a long reign. Unfortunately he prematurely died at the age of 49, leaving the empire to a boy (Honorius was 10) and an elder son Arcadius

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whose lack of political ability and stupidity is recorded by almost all ancient sources. About the choice of dynastic continuity to ensure civil peace, see Jones 1990, 173-174.

<sup>27</sup> Prud. *C. Symm.* 1.9-18:

<sup>28</sup> Theodosius was perhaps a little too zealous even for a Christian point of view. Many acts of violence against pagans committed by Christian fanatics remained unpunished, while the emperor was more and more implacable against heretics. Many moderate and tolerant Christians may have disagreed with this policy, but Prudentius in accordance with the most radical bishops gave an enthusiastic support to the emperor.

<sup>29</sup> Prudentius has probably in mind Jesus' word as recorded by Mark (9.43-49): "if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched", but cross-references to Stoic passages about treatment of the diseases of the soul cannot be excluded (see Sen. *De ira* 6.2).

<sup>30</sup> Prud. *C. Symm.* 2.1117-1120:

<sup>31</sup> Concerning political views of the senatorial aristocracy see Salzman 1989.

<sup>32</sup> Prudentius' emphasis on the destruction of old Roman identity can be linked to a radical reading of *Eph.* 4.17-24: "Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!— assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness".

<sup>33</sup> About the importance of such a visit, Salzman 1989, 350 (the idea of tradition) and 351, about Roman conceptions of cult: "the argument for the continuation of state funding which Symmachus advances is based on the belief that for a religious rite to be valid, it must have the support of the state".

<sup>34</sup> Claud. *6 Honor.* 55-62: *Nil optimus ille / Divorum toro meruit felicius aevo / Quam quod Romuleis victor sub moenibus egit / Te consorte dies, cum se melioribus addens / Exemplis civem gereret terrore remoto / Alternos cum plebe iocos dilectaque passus / Iurgia patriciasque domos privataque passim / Visere deposito dignatus limina fastu.*



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<sup>35</sup> Claud. 6 *Honor.* 641-646: *iam Thybris in uno / Et Bruti cernit trabeas et scepra Quirini. / Consule laetatur post plurima saecula viso / Pallanteus apex; agnoscunt rostra curules / Auditas quondam proavis, desuetaque cingit / Regius auratis fora fascibus Vlpia lictor.*

<sup>36</sup> Ammian. 16.10. Ammianus' account seems to be only partly malicious. If he presents Constantius' *adventus* as one of a conqueror in a captive city, he points out that the prince, as Theodosius and Honorius, showed certain respect to the Senate and was quite indulgent to the people's jokes. Yet Ammianus' attitude towards Constantius (see 21.16) is rather negative, especially compared to Julian's virtues.

<sup>37</sup> This translation is not as clear and direct as the Latin verse: the meaning is "virtue chose new emperors not according to familial ties but according to moral virtue".

<sup>38</sup> In accordance with this special part of Claudian's political philosophy, see the panegyric for Honorius' 4<sup>th</sup> consulship. In the long speech delivered by Theodosius' ghost to his son, there are allusions to tyrants who reign in the East but cannot be accepted by true Romans (306-320). Emperors who, like Nero, tried to reign like Eastern kings were either destroyed by the people or condemned to an eternal shame (313-314). Claudian seems to support a succession of emperors in which dynastic elements could be counterbalanced by a deep examination of the candidate's moral virtues. This could be possible if the future emperor had already been associated to his predecessor's power. It is the reason why Claudian warmly supports adoption and seems to consider that the house of Constantine used the principle of dynastic succession without regarding either ability or virtue of the candidates.

<sup>39</sup> Claud. 6 *Honor.* 651-653: *cuius cunabula fovit / Curia, quem primi tandem videre Quirites, / Quem domitis auspex peperit Victoria bellis!*

<sup>40</sup> There has been many attempts to reduce Symmachus' controversy to a financial one (see Paschoud 1965 but with the *retractatio* in Paschoud 1983). Against these explanations, see Salzman 1989, 352. In the following, though I'll take financial problems into account, I don't intend to reduce the conflict to financial and even economic issues, but, on the contrary to show how financial questions reactivated the most important issue for both pagans and Christians: what is exactly the best model for imperial power?

<sup>41</sup> Prud. *C. Symm.* 1.616-624: *Ipse magistratum tibi consulis, ipse tribunal / contulit auratum que togae donauit amictum, / cuius religio tibi displicet.*

<sup>42</sup> About this period and Theodosius' administration, see for example Cameron 1969, and especially Matthews, 1971. Useful notes in Charlet 2000, ix-xi.

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<sup>43</sup> Barnes 1976 suggests that the purpose of the journey is the return of the altar of Victory in the Senate's house but my opinion is that, in exchange for a loyal participation to Stilicho's war achievements, the Senate asked Honorius to come to Rome and perhaps to stay for a long time in the old capital, and that Stilicho (either for political interests or according to personal convictions) favoured a demand including a more traditional policy.

<sup>44</sup> Charlet 2000, 23-25 provides parallels between 4 *Honor.* 270-301 and *Clem.* 1, 8, 1; 1, 5, 7; 1, 19, 6 etc. Seneca's treatise is the model of Theodosius' speech, including as complements *topoi* coming from late panegyrics.

<sup>45</sup> *Stilic.* 3, 6-7: *uenerare curulem / quae tibi restituit fasces.*

<sup>46</sup> Stilicho needed no special political ability to understand this danger. The conflict about the Altar of Victory showed that pagans would not easily abdicate what they held for essential, and Eugenius' short but dangerous usurpation had found support amongst pagans and made clear that desperate pagans could be a danger for the Church. Arbogast, Eugenius' *magister militum*, and Nicomachus Flavianus, his pretorian prefect, were zealous pagans. Some rumours, pretending that after their victory on Theodosius they would stable their horses in the churches and conscript the clergy, are undoubtedly echoes of the fear provoked among Christians by such a pagan reaction. See Jones 1990, 169.

<sup>47</sup> *Oros.* 7.38 : *comes Stilico, Vandalorum inbellis auarae perfidae et dolosae gentis genere editus, parui pendens quod sub imperatore imperabat, Eucherium filium suum, sicut a plerisque traditur, iam inde Christianorum persecutionem a puero priuatoque meditantem, in imperium quoquo modo substituere nitebatur.*