

# AMBROSE'S CONTEMPORARIES AND THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF NORTHERN ITALY\*

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## INTRODUCTION

The question of the Christianization of Italy in the late fourth century has been much discussed in the recent past, but it has rarely been approached at local level, despite the fact that focusing upon local situations, where a wealth of material is available, makes it easier to follow the interplay between paganism and Christianity.

The geographical area broadly corresponding to Northern Italy offers a vast body of material, especially from the second half of the fourth to the first half of the fifth century. There are enough archaeological and epigraphic sources for us to get an idea of the changes in urban organization brought about by Christianity. In terms of literary sources, the North of Italy is a privileged region (as are Cappadocia at the time of Basil and the two Gregories and Syria at the time of John Chrysostom and Theodoret of Cyrrhus) in that we have the sermons of a number of bishops who were very close to Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. These texts have been used to study the economy of the region<sup>1</sup> but they are also basic for elucidating Christian doctrine and practice at the time of Ambrose.<sup>2</sup>

A specific aspect of this literature is its anti-paganism. It ought, therefore, to be possible to use it to study the survival of traditional cults and the opposition to Christianity. I do not share the opinion that anti-pagan literature in the fourth and fifth centuries was merely conventional and committed *en bloc* to a largely formal battle against a 'republican idolatry' deemed to have long been dead.<sup>3</sup> Homilies, epistles and sermons by North-Italian bishops, scattered over fifty years, bear witness to their need to mould their preaching according to the concrete problems of their bishoprics. Only a thorough knowledge of local peculiarities could enable them to surmount the hurdles impeding conversion and, consequently, a stronger Church.

In this connection, the anti-idolatric slant of the sermons changed in accordance with different local situations, in relation to the heterogeneous religious traditions in individual regions. Furthermore, fluctuations in anti-pagan attitudes testify to different phases of the evolution of Christianity in each area, corresponding to historical contexts that changed in a matter of a few decades. More specifically, major differences are to be found between Ambrose (and other contemporary bishops) and Maximus, Bishop of Turin at the beginning of the fifth century. The latter adopted new methods (often at variance with those recommended by Ambrose) both in the Christianization of the cities and in the attempt to eliminate paganism in the countryside.

There are various reasons for such differences. Maximus' sermons were delivered during the first barbarian invasions, in a besieged city, where the rural populace and people living in undefended towns had taken refuge. The Church was, therefore, called upon to play the role of a welfare agency, and badly needed concrete evidence of the Christian convictions of the wealthier classes in order to perform its charitable activities. As far as the countryside around Turin is concerned, Maximus was faced with a type of paganism different from that of other areas of Northern Italy. Here romanization had been less pervasive and there survived, behind a façade of religious syncretism, strong autochthonous traditions. Against these Maximus took the path of intolerance and repression. This attitude was also related to the institutionalization of

\* I wish to thank Professor Averil Cameron for her encouragement. This paper is partly based on my doctoral thesis, for which I am very much indebted to Professor Lellia Cracco Ruggini and to Professor Guido Clemente who supervised it.

<sup>1</sup> L. Cracco Ruggini, *Economia e società nell'Italia Annonaria. Rapporti fra agricoltura e commercio dal IV al VI secolo d.C.* (1961).

<sup>2</sup> cf. L. Padovese, *L'originalità cristiana. Il pensiero etico sociale di alcuni vescovi norditaliani del IV secolo* (1983); C. Truzzi, *Zeno, Gaudenzio, Cromazio. Testi e contenuti della predicazione cristiana per le Chiese di Verona, Brescia e Aquileia (360-410)* (1985).

<sup>3</sup> R. A. Markus, 'Paganism, Christianity and the Latin Classics in the Fourth Century', in J. W. Binns (Ed.), *Latin Literature of the Fourth Century* (1974), 1-21.

the bishop's role in the city: new legislation made it possible to pursue Christianization via coercion, forsaking the gradual approach taken in the past. Although he considered himself a follower of Ambrose, therefore, Maximus embodied a profoundly different concept of the Church.

A critical approach to the problem of conversion requires that adequate consideration be given not only to the results of the process, but also to the ways and means by which it was achieved. I will try, therefore, to reconstruct the ideology of the bishops of a number of towns in Northern Italy on the basis of their sermons and Ambrose's letters to them (I,1). As in the case of Maximus, their opinions were formed in relation to the religious situation prevailing in their bishoprics. Section I,2 of this paper seeks to evaluate the ratios of Christians to pagans in Northern Italy between 375 and *c.* 385, when most of the bishops with whom we are concerned came to the fore.

It is equally necessary to ask whom the Church was addressing in its work of evangelization at the end of the fourth century. This type of research is aided by a peculiar feature of the Cisalpine homilies, which are basically urban in nature and aimed at winning over ever broader strata in the *civitas*. The large-scale building programme carried out by the bishops over a time-span of twenty years is the best evidence that their preaching was, in fact, chiefly aimed at winning a consensus of the notables (II,1).

Accordingly, in order to encourage conversion among the wealthy, the bishops became concerned with the style of their sermons, so as to satisfy the rhetorical requirements of the well-educated. For a number of topics, such as alms-giving, they also relied on traditional patterns of behaviour among land-owners, who were more inclined to donate in the tradition of euergetism than to pay tax (II,2).

Finally, after considering the bishops' actions in the *civitas* to secure the support of the urban classes, we still have to explore whether this pronounced interest in the urban milieu constituted the first or rather the final stage of Christianization. This question must be raised in parallel with the broader historical problem of the persistence of paganism in rural areas. The idea of such persistence, taken for granted by many scholars, is in fact challenged by evidence of early rural Christianization, preceding that of towns. Both issues will be examined in the light of records pertaining to *Italia annonaria*.

In III,1 Maximus' decision to entrust the *domini* with the Christianization of the countryside will be discussed. Maximus' attitude must also be examined in the light of such incidents as the martyrdom inflicted in 397 upon three priests, whom the Bishop of Trento had sent to the Val di Non. The incident was to make the Church aware of the inadequacy of its means in penetrating rural areas. We are not informed about other such incidents in Northern Italy; one has to wait until the late sixth century for the Church, then much better endowed with material and human resources, to practice the ideology of missionary Christianity in order to convert *Barbaria*.

The methods adopted by different bishops cannot be discussed without giving due consideration to the survival of pagan cults in urban and rural milieux. The conflict between pagans and Christians will, therefore, be still the main focus of our discussion. I shall not analyse, however, the family and political alliances that emerged within senatorial circles in Rome in relation to their Christianization.<sup>4</sup> I shall concentrate rather on the changes in urban life-styles and in town-planning brought about by the ascendancy of Christianity in a specific area.

#### I,1 AMBROSE AND THE BISHOP-WRITERS OF NORTHERN ITALY

At least three of the North-Italian bishops whose homilies or epistles are preserved were elected thanks to Ambrose's direct intervention. Immediately after his

<sup>4</sup> It is, however, appropriate to underline the need for a political rather than a totally religious interpretation of the last twenty years of the fourth century: see

recently, A. Marcone, 'La fine del paganesimo a Roma: per un'interpretazione politica', in *Studi offerti a Q. M. Quartiroli e D. Magnino* (1987), 53-9.

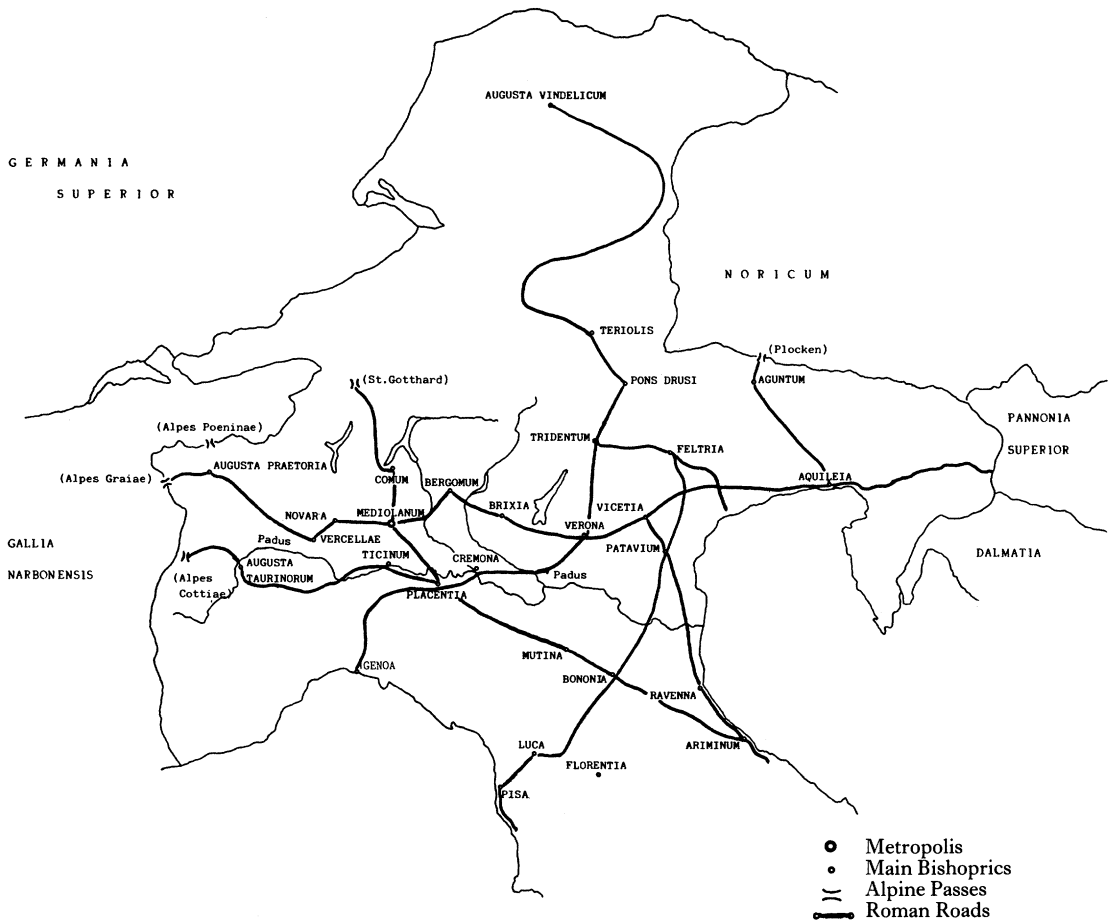


FIG. 1 THE ANNONARIAN VICARIATE

consecration, Vigilus, the first Bishop of Tridentum, around 385–88, asked the metropolitan of Milan for *institutionis insignia*, i.e. for advice on how to run his diocese.<sup>5</sup> Ambrose's reply can be viewed as a *codicillus* ratifying his election.<sup>6</sup> Only two letters by Vigilus are extant: one addressed to Simplicianus and the other to John Chrysostom; both letters notify the bishops of the two capitals of the empire of the martyrdom suffered by three priests of his diocese (*PL* 13. 549–58). They represent one of the few useful sources for the conflict between pagans and Christians in extra-urban areas.

At the time of Valerian's death in 388 and Chromatius' accession, Ambrose is known to have been in Aquileia.<sup>7</sup> The assumption of Ambrose's direct involvement in choosing the head of the church of Aquileia is buttressed by the knowledge that we do have about the fruitful co-operation between Ambrose and Chromatius. Ten years before his own election, at the Council of Aquileia in 381, Chromatius had supported Ambrose against the Arians Palladius and Secondianus.<sup>8</sup> Only one letter from Ambrose to Chromatius is extant (*Ep.* 50); however, since it is presented as the first in a series, it can safely be assumed that a frequent exchange ensued. Chromatius'

<sup>5</sup> Ambr., *Ep.* 19, *PL* 16. 982–94. The date of his election is uncertain: cf. G. Ciccolini, 'Problemi paleocristiani della Chiesa tridentina', *Studi Trentini di Scienze Storiche* 31 (1952), 160–9.

<sup>6</sup> R. Lizzi, 'Codicilli imperiali e *insignia* episcopali: un'affinità significativa', *RIL* 122 (1988), 3–13.

<sup>7</sup> J. Lemarié (Ed.), *Chromace d'Aquilée. Sermons* 1, *SC* 154, (1969), 46.

<sup>8</sup> L. Cracco Ruggini, 'Ambrogio e le opposizioni anticattoliche fra il 383 e il 390', *Augustinianum* 14 (1974), 409–12.

episcopal policy was, in fact, broadly inspired by Ambrose's directives, as is shown by the very large number of churches and martyria consecrated by Chromatius in Aquileia; in terms of magnificence and numbers they can only be compared to those erected in Milan by Ambrose. This is also confirmed by Chromatius' sermons (some of which were formerly attributed to Ambrose), a very important source for the students of Christianization in and around Aquileia.

Finally, Gaudentius mentions in one of his sermons the role played by Ambrose in his election in Brixia.<sup>9</sup> After Filastrius' death, Ambrose made a commitment *vis-à-vis* other colleagues from neighbouring bishoprics to choose Gaudentius. Since the latter was then on a mission in the East, they sent him a message, threatening him with universal excommunication, should he not agree to be elected. After becoming Bishop of Brixia, Gaudentius' relationship with Ambrose remained excellent. We know that he was invited to Milan at least once, to deliver a sermon in honour of St Peter and St Paul (*Tr.* 20). He edited a collection of his *Tractatus* himself, representing a specimen of the topics dealt with by a bishop in the course of the liturgical year, in order to convey to the faithful a correct interpretation of the most significant events in the history of Christianity.

Unlike the above-mentioned churchmen, Zeno had been active in Verona at least ten years before Ambrose's accession in Milan. He was nevertheless probably acquainted with Ambrose and supportive of the new orthodox bishop towards the end of his own episcopate.<sup>10</sup> In Zeno's case too a collection of homilies has survived. They precede chronologically the writings of the other bishops in Northern Italy and are thus instrumental in clarifying the situation of the Church in the early stages of Christianization in that area.

Maximus of Turin was consecrated one or two years after Ambrose's death; his ties with the latter seem to be borne out by the Ambrosian atmosphere at the council held in Turin soon after his election.<sup>11</sup> In practice, however, Maximus' adherence to Ambrose's heritage was merely formal. His sermons bear witness to the changes which occurred within the Church in the course of half a century (370–420), to the expansion of the actual powers held by the bishops and to the new spiritual feeling of Christians in Northern Italy.

We have no written testimony from the other bishops selected by Ambrose for neighbouring seats in Northern Italy, such as Sabinus of Placentia,<sup>12</sup> Constantius of Claterna, Felix of Comum,<sup>13</sup> Bassianus of Laus Pompeia, Gaudentius of Novara or Honoratus of Vercellae.<sup>14</sup> We do, however, have Ambrose's letters to several of them testifying to the lively exchange he initiated among the bishops of Northern Italy. The habit of circulating *communio epistulae* among the bishops of metropolitan seats started in the East during the Arian dispute. Ambrose adapted this instrument to the requirements of Northern Italy with a view to strengthening the orthodox front. Thus he made known to a wide audience a genre which the members of the cultivated élite in the East and West had always used to maintain and develop the

<sup>9</sup> Gaud. Brix., *Tr.* 16, *PL* 20, *CSEL* 68 (ed. A. Glueck, 1936), 139. A number of factors have led scholars to move the traditional date of his accession to 396–7: cf. S. Boehrer, *Gaudentius of Brescia: Sermons and Letters* (1965), 1–6.

<sup>10</sup> The eighteenth-century editors of Zeno's sermons set the duration of Zeno's episcopate between 362 and 380 (cf. *PL* 11, 81) and, in spite of many alternative datings proposed by other scholars, a number of elements in the sermons suggest that these dates are the most plausible.

<sup>11</sup> E. Chaffin, 'The Application of Nicaea Canon 6 and the date of the Synod of Turin', *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa* 16, 2 (1980), 257–72.

<sup>12</sup> Sabinus of Placentia attended the Council at Aquileia in 381 and Milan in 390. He can probably be identified as the deacon from Milan named in four letters by Basil. Thus he was the same person who had brought to Athanasius the conciliar letter from Rome:

cf. F. Lanzoni, *Le diocesi d'Italia dalle origini al principio del sec. VII*, Studi e Testi 35 (1927), 446–8. The anti-Arian letter also expressed the hostility of the West against Auxentius of Milan. Sabinus' election followed his mission to the East in 370: M. Richard, 'Saint Basile et la mission du diacre Sabinus', *AB* 67 (1949), 132–9.

<sup>13</sup> For Constantius, cf. Ambr., *Ep.* 2, *PL* 16, 879 and for Ambrose's role in Felix' election, see Ambr., *Ep.* 4, 889.

<sup>14</sup> A. Caretta, *S. Bassiano di Lodi. Storia e leggenda* (1966), 7–18, has moved the date of Bassianus' consecration to 377–8. Ambrose's role in the election of Gaudentius of Novara is described in the *Vita Gaudentii*. The accession took place during Ambrose's stay at Novara on his way to Vercelli, where he settled the controversial succession to Limenius: cf. J. R. Palanque, *Saint Ambroise et l'Empire romain* (1933), 555.

solidarity of their group.<sup>15</sup> A number of these lengthy epistles dealt with issues of scriptural interpretation, including those to Simplicianus, Ambrose's successor in Milan. He was older than Ambrose and already famous for his scriptural knowledge<sup>16</sup> when Ambrose was elected bishop. So it is probable that Simplicianus was his spiritual guide, urging him to write brief exegetical works. Sabinus too played the same role for Ambrose, who discussed with him the interpretation of entire books of the Bible and sent him his treatises before publishing them.<sup>17</sup> Most, however, also broach problems pertaining to the running of individual bishoprics. They could be defined as ethical statutes, aimed at regulating the social conduct of the communities.

Besides a number of structural similarities and conventional *topoi*, each letter contained specific recommendations. This is why they can be used as sources to shed light upon the relations between citizens who were still pagan and those newly-Christianized as well as on the methods recommended by Ambrose for the advancement of the new creed.

In his letter to Constantius, the Bishop of Claterna,<sup>18</sup> for example, Ambrose focused upon how the former's preaching ought to try to settle the disputes among landowners striving to expand their holdings.<sup>19</sup> By addressing the landowners directly, he urged Constantius to make them aware of the *status* of the *operarii*, *mercennarii* and *servi* working for them.<sup>20</sup> Ambrose did not dwell upon the conventional motif of greed, but broached the specific relationship between the *domini*, or between these and their serfs. The new bishopric was located in the area of *Italia Annonaria* which around 380 was ravaged by a severe agricultural crisis;<sup>21</sup> Ambrose's intention was, therefore, to convey to the *praesul* an idea of the social conflicts that, under such economic circumstances, were liable to slow down the conversion of the leading urban groups (*domini*) and, at the other extreme, of the labourers. Concerning the latter, Constantius was also invited to praise *beata paupertas* and to emphasize social justice.<sup>22</sup>

During the last twenty-five years of the fourth century, Tridentum, located along the Via Claudia Augusta leading to Raetia, had become a zone of transit for the armies sent to police the province. After the collapse of the limes of Raetia due to the Alemannic invasions, Tridentum found itself again a frontier town. The problems confronting the bishop sent there around 385 were serious enough already and were further exacerbated when, after 395, the remainder of the Raetic provinces were lost following the withdrawal of troops by Stilico.<sup>23</sup>

The relevance of Ambrose's advice to Vigilus is self-evident. Two themes are of particular interest: the exhortation to *hospitalitas* and the avoidance of conjugal links with women of different creed or stock. The former, hinging on the contrast between *necessitas* and *voluptas*,<sup>24</sup> alluded to the *hospitalitatis munus* or *necessitas* underlying the relations between landowners and soldiers in the towns that hosted military units.<sup>25</sup> By preaching about the problem, it was hoped that the bishop could prevent tension and friction between citizens and the authorities.<sup>26</sup> Such work of mediation made Vigilus a 'point of reference' for the landowners as well as the most important party for the local imperial representatives. This example shows clearly how quickly a

<sup>15</sup> cf. V. Monachino, 'Communio e primato nella controversia ariana' in *Comunione Interecclesiale. Acta Conventus Internationalis (Roma 1967)* (1972), 319-76; R. Lizzi, *Vescovi e strutture ecclesiastiche nella città tardoantica. L'Italia Annonaria nel IV-V secolo d.C.* (1989), 15-28.

<sup>16</sup> Aug., *Conf.* 8, 1, 1; 2, 3, 4; 5, 10; *Retract.* 2, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Ambr., *Epp.* 37, 38, 65, 67 to Simplicianus; Ambr., *Epp.* 32, 45-9 to Sabinus.

<sup>18</sup> In his letter Ambrose asked Constantius to take over Forum Cornelii's seat temporarily (*Ep.* 2, 27). Since Forum Cornelii has been identified with Imula, some scholars have believed that Bononia or Faventia was Constantius' bishopric. During the fourth century, however, another town, Claterna, now vanished, still existed. It was closer to Imula than Bononia. Thus Claterna might have been Constantius' seat. See F. De

Ruggiero, *Dizionario Epigrafico* II, 1, 280.

<sup>19</sup> Ambr., *Ep.* 2, 30.

<sup>20</sup> *Ep.* 2, 12; 31.

<sup>21</sup> Ruggini, *Economia e società*, 56-84.

<sup>22</sup> Concerning Ambrose's social ideas in his other works, cf. V. R. Vasey, *The Social Ideas in the Works of St. Ambrose. A Study on 'De Nabuthe'* (1982).

<sup>23</sup> F. De Ruggiero, *Dizionario Epigrafico* IV, 1205 ff.

<sup>24</sup> Ambr., *Ep.* 19, 6; *PL* 16, 984.

<sup>25</sup> Symm. II, 52; VI, 72; IX, 48.

<sup>26</sup> Many authorities had to provide for quarterings in the towns: *curiales* could choose the quarters, but the *magister officiorum* and the *mensores* had executive functions: see S. Roda, 'Militaris impressio e proprietà senatoria nel tardo Impero' in *Studi in onore di S. Calderone* (forthcoming).

representative of the institutional church could become a central and authoritative figure even in a town that had only recently become a bishopric.

Ambrose's interest in mixed marriages is even greater. He deals with this subject at the opening of his letter and takes it up again in a lengthy conclusion.<sup>27</sup> Such marriages must have been particularly common in Tridentum since Ambrose does not confine himself to pointing out the issue but provides the complete outline for a sermon. We are led to believe that it was not so much marriages between Romans and barbarians that threatened the region's Christianization, but rather those with pagans. Only a few months after Ambrose's death and after ten years of Vigilius' tenancy, a scuffle between Christian and pagan groups in a village of the Val di Non, not far from Tridentum, resulted in the slaughtering of levites active in that area.<sup>28</sup>

## I,2 THE DYNAMICS OF RELIGION IN NORTHERN ITALY

In seeking to reconstruct the Christianization of a region we can hardly neglect the attitudes of those who clung to the existing cults. The most intractable problem lies in reconstructing pagan attitudes through hostile Christian sources, which are often apt to exaggerate. Very often, moreover, they are the only sources available. We can only try to identify a few aspects of a movement that was neither simple nor linear. Many factors affected the Church's programme, not least importantly the number of converts. Contrary to what was until recently believed we are now aware that Christianity had only a limited spread at the end of the fourth century, especially in the western part of the empire. As for Africa, recent studies on individual towns show that the Augustinian vision of a wholly Christianized region is an exaggeration.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, the findings of research carried out over the last few years on Christian topography in the towns of Gaul speak for a reappraisal of the progress of Christianity in that region.<sup>30</sup>

We derive a similar impression from the sources pertaining to North Italy: the homilies produced there towards the end of the fourth century present a cross-section of the most arduous problems which confronted the Church. The persistence of paganism comes to the fore as a theme and more specifically, in 395–400, of an urban paganism identifying itself with the traditional political devotion to Rome of the local ruling classes. It is, moreover, clear that the very potential for penetration of the evangelistic message was seriously jeopardized by the splintering of Christians into opposed doctrinal groups.

If we view the consolidation of the Church's influence in North Italy in a dynamic and diachronic perspective, a number of often neglected factors become significant. During Ambrose's episcopate, catholic bishops were elected in most towns of the Annonarian Vicariate, whereas, up until ten years before, in Milan itself, they had been marginal as compared with Arians. Furthermore, following Ambrose's example, Christian buildings were erected in several towns as part of a programme of Christian construction work which eventually changed the appearance of the cities concerned.<sup>31</sup> We can thus speak of the first signs of a general consolidation of the Church only in the last two decades of the fourth century.

Neither Christian nor non-Christian documents from the previous period are

<sup>27</sup> Ambr., *Ep.* 19, 2; 7–34.

<sup>28</sup> Below, III, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Cl. Lepelley, 'Les limites de la christianisation de l'État romain sous Constantin et ses successeurs', in *Christianisme et pouvoirs politiques* (1973), 25–41; Y. Thébert, 'L'évolution urbaine dans les provinces orientales de l'Afrique romaine tardive', *Opus* 2 (1983), 99–130.

<sup>30</sup> In general, see P. A. Février, 'Permanences et héritages de l'Antiquité dans la topographie des villes de l'Occident durant le haut Moyen Âge', in *XXI Settimana di Spoleto* (1974), 41–138. As for Gaul in particular, a good summary in Ch. Pietri, 'Remarques sur la topographie chrétienne des cités de la Gaul entre Loire et Rhin (des origines au VIIe siècle)', *Revue*

*d'Hist. de l'Église de France* 62 (1975), 189–204 and idem, 'L'espace chrétien de la cité. Le vicus christianorum et l'espace chrétien de la cité arverne (Clermont)', *Revue d'Hist. de l'Église de France* 66 (1980), 177–208.

<sup>31</sup> Following Ambrose's example, new churches were erected in Aquileia and in Concordia (see *supra*), in Comum (cf. V. Barelli, 'Il san Carpofofo', *Rivista archeologica di Como* 1 (1972), 16–32), in Laus Pompeia (cf. Ambr., *Ep.* 4, 1–2; see A. Frova, 'Rapporto preliminare su saggi di scavi a Lodi Vecchio', *Archivio storico di Lodi* (1955), 16–29), in Brixia (cf. Gaud. Brix., *Tr.* 17, 971; *CSEL* 37, 150; see E. Cattaneo, 'La chiesa bresciana delle origini', in *Storia di Brescia* (1963), 343–59).

very numerous. We know that before Ambrose some bishops wrote religious works. Eusebius of Vercellae, for instance, translated some of the works of Eusebius of Caesarea. The *Codex Vercellensis*, with the oldest Gospel text in Latin, has been attributed to him. An old manuscript also gives to Eusebius the treatise *De Trinitate* which modern scholars believe to have been written by Athanasius or by Vigilius of Thapsus. We have also some of Eusebius' epistles from his exile. Jerome (*De vir. ill.* 97; *PL* 23, 735–8) says that Fortunatianus of Aquileia wrote a commentary on the Gospel *sermone rustico* from which a few fragments remain. Finally, Gaudentius of Brixia mentions Philastrius' treatises against pagans, Hebrews and heretics (Gaud. Brix., *Tr.* 21; *PL* 20, 999), though all that remains by Philastrius is the *Diversarum hereseon liber* (*CC* IX, 217–324). Against this background with few Christian documents surviving, the evidence supplied by Zeno's sermons is very valuable, as the only collection of homilies that has been preserved from pre-Ambrosian times.<sup>32</sup> Even though it is impossible to attach a precise date to the different sermons of the collection, we can ascertain in general terms the degree of pagan persistence in the town. Such persistence was still publicly expressed in official cults. Sacrifices in urban temples were regularly practised,<sup>33</sup> *parentalia* were still being celebrated<sup>34</sup> and *haruspices* consulted;<sup>35</sup> the official pagan calendar was still being observed.<sup>36</sup>

In general, and especially in moral treatises, the bishop constantly underlined the contrast between the illicit *mores* of those who were still adhering to the ancient cults and the sanctity of the small group of neophytes. Even among those who celebrated the Christian liturgy and thought of themselves as Christians, the faith was not fully consolidated. Many secretly preserved the pagan temples located on their estates and strove not to lose the *ius templorum*.<sup>37</sup> The bishop was, therefore, acting within a town that was only partially Christian, as indeed remained the case until the end of his episcopate, when a few sermons which can be dated around 378–9 indicate that the balance between the different creeds was basically unchanged.

Migne already noted a certain similarity between the final section of Zeno's *Tr.* 14 and those passages of *De Officiis* where Ambrose mentions having sold church furnishings to redeem prisoners-of-war.<sup>38</sup> In Verona, says the bishop, the entire Christian group had shown outstanding generosity in redeeming those who had been captured, giving asylum to refugees, bestowing upon the strangers the charity that was usually reserved for the local destitute.<sup>39</sup>

Even though an analysis of Zeno's vocabulary permits no clear-cut conclusions about the relation between the two texts, other passages in the treatise would point to a dating between 378 and 379. The impact of the catastrophic defeat at Adrianople was felt also in North-Eastern Italy: the arrival of masses of people who had escaped from the devastated territories and the danger of a barbarian invasion via the Alpine passes must have induced typical wealth-hoarding reactions. In particular, money hoards, frequently found throughout the Po valley,<sup>40</sup> document a hasty quest for secret 'safes' before impending threats. Among the money hoards found throughout the north of Italy, the most famous is that of Vénera, near Verona: 50,591 bronze coins, perhaps a military box from the time of Probus (287–8). Many of these hoards date from the third century, from the time of Gallienus and Claudius Gothicus, but there are also some from the fourth century.<sup>41</sup> Zeno seems to be alluding to this practice when he describes the hectic attempts by well-off citizens to conceal under the ground 'the gold and the silver that had been extracted from it with so much toil'<sup>42</sup>

<sup>32</sup> For Eusebius of Vercellae, see *CC* IX (ed. V. Bulhart, 1972), 3–110 and Ph. Levine, 'Historical Evidence for Calligraphic Activity in Vercelli from St. Eusebius to Atto', *Speculum* 30 (1955), 561–81. For the other authors, see Ch. Pietri, *Roma Christiana* I (1977), 730–48.

<sup>33</sup> Zeno II, 7, 14–16, *CC* 22 (ed. B. Loeffstedt, 1971), 174–5.

<sup>34</sup> Zeno I, 25, II, p. 75, 90–4.

<sup>35</sup> Zeno I, 25, II, p. 75, 95–6.

<sup>36</sup> Zeno I, 25, II, p. 75, 95.

<sup>37</sup> Zeno I, 25, 10, p. 75, 85–9.

<sup>38</sup> *PL* II, 335 n. 21.

<sup>39</sup> Zeno I, 14, 8, p. 59, 74–7.

<sup>40</sup> L. Cracco Ruggini, 'Milano nella circolazione monetaria del tardo impero: esigenze politiche e risposte socioeconomiche', in *La zecca di Milano, Atti del Convegno Internazionale (Milano 9–14 maggio 1983)* (1984), 49.

<sup>41</sup> L. Cracco Ruggini, 'Uomini senza terra e terra senza uomini nell'Italia antica', *Quaderni di Società rurale* 3 (1963), 33.

<sup>42</sup> Zeno I, 14, 3, p. 57, 24–33; cf. I, 14, 5, p. 58, 41–6.

as well as hoards of precious stones and jewels.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the mention of war in these sermons, as one of the most devastating effects of avarice, along with the description of destroyed cities and ravaged country roads which the passage of armies had made unfit for transit, suggests that the bishop was contemplating recent events.<sup>44</sup>

Despite these harsh circumstances, Zeno made a distinction between the behaviour of those he was addressing and those he was denouncing: 'non ad avaros, sed de avaris sermonem fecimus... sed haec non ad avaros, fratres, quorum largitas provinciis omnibus nota est'.<sup>45</sup> This distinction between one group of people and the rest of the population would appear to point clearly to the bishop's position as the head of a relatively narrow group of faithful people. The *patres* who were addressing under similar circumstances towns that were, at least formally, completely converted, adopted quite a different tone. It was no longer a matter of contrasting the ethical superiority of a handful of neophytes with the immorality of the remaining citizens; there appears instead the stock theme of the primitive apostolic communities, described as the epitome of charity and brotherhood as against the lack of piety of the new Christians.<sup>46</sup>

In a sermon dated to 412, Maximus of Turin denounced the miserable situation of the people, whose vigour, physical and spiritual, had been sapped by the defensive efforts they had been mounting for several years.<sup>47</sup> The town was torn by deep tension. Wealth was being hoarded; nobody was helping his brother; indeed people were trying to ruin each other. The misfortunes of the people were giving rise to crimes worse than usury and the other recent modes of profiteering. Many people were buying at low prices gold jewellery, silken robes and men that had been the booty of the barbarian army: 'sic et isti avaritiae lupi praedonum vestigia subsequuti sunt, ut quod illorum rapacitati superavit, horum cederet feritati'.<sup>48</sup> Those people were not making lawful sales or purchases but were virtual accessories after the fact, an accusation made publicly and with surprising harshness.<sup>49</sup>

Under similar circumstances and with only about a thirty years' interval, two bishops addressed their faithful with a completely different sense of authority and awareness of their position. Take, for example, Ambrose's almost defensive attitude in *De Officiis*, where he attempts to justify his initiative of redeeming the prisoners after Hadrianople. He had been criticized not so much for the charitable deed itself, but rather for the way in which he had so rapidly obtained the money which was required to accomplish it. With no precedent for such an action, Ambrose sold all the church furnishings. Apart from the anti-Arian implications of this gesture (the furnishings are assumed to have belonged to an Arian, not to a Catholic church), the above incident supplies us with further information: at this stage, only a few years after his election in a non-orthodox city, Ambrose was not yet able to rely on a compact group of devout people willing to give economic backing to his initiatives, as was the case for Zeno after ten years of his episcopate.

A comparison between the behaviour of the three bishops in relation to the same act of charity, in different times and places, bears out the changed relationship between bishop and citizens. The changes in question did not, however, originate only from the bishops' ability to win to Christianity ever larger groups, by keeping up the struggle against heresy and paganism. A piece of legislation by Honorius, enacted in Ravenna in 408, throws some light on the issue: the emperor empowered the bishops to supervise the redemption of prisoners, giving them the authority of *curiales* and *rectores*.<sup>50</sup> With the state's endorsement, the bishops were granted the exercise of a controlling function over the *civitas*, now formally defined as entirely Christian. But the official conversion process fostered by the systematic legislation against heretics, apostates and pagans enacted from Theodosius I onwards did not succeed in eradicating adherence to ancient religious traditions either in the towns or in the country.

<sup>43</sup> Zeno I, 5, 18, pp. 41-2; 134-42.

<sup>44</sup> Zeno I, 5, 3, p. 38, 18-23; *ibid.* 7, p. 39, 52-6.

<sup>45</sup> Zeno I, 5, 17, p. 41, 120-1; I, 14, 8, p. 59, 72-4.

<sup>46</sup> Max. Taur., *Sermones* 17 and 18, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (CCSL) 23 (ed. A. Mutzenbecher, 1962), pp. 62-9.

<sup>47</sup> For the date, see O. Maenchen-Helfen, 'The Date of Maximus of Turin's *sermo* XVIII', *VC* 18, 2 (1964), 114-15.

<sup>48</sup> Max. Taur. 18, p. 69, 59-60.

<sup>49</sup> Max. Taur. 18, p. 69, 61-6.

<sup>50</sup> *CTh* v, 7, 2 (Dec. 409) = *Brev.* v, 5, 2 (408).



Around 379, Northern Italy still presented an extremely confused religious scenario, with ratios of Christians to pagans that fluctuated widely from town to town. In Verona, for instance, the Christians, though more numerous than they had been a decade before, were far from encompassing the whole populace. Zeno was in a position to praise the *mores* only of a group of faithful, with the remaining citizens allegedly living in impiety. Similarly when celebrating the consecration of the new church, he was led to compare the relative modesty of the latter with the grandness of urban synagogues and temples.<sup>51</sup> So the indication in another sermon of the on-going decadence (*quamvis ruina*) of the pagan or Jewish temples need not be explained as a sign of actual detachment from pagan cults by the *decuriones*, but as one of the first effects of the imperial power's hostility to paganism. The consequent control of governors over urban construction programmes in fact probably succeeded in convincing citizens that quite apart from their own faith, it was pointless to keep financing the restoration and upkeep of traditional monuments, also taking account of the heavy burden from other levies. The same thing was occurring at that time in many North-African towns where the *curiales* in fact remained pagan for a long time.<sup>52</sup>

Zeno's church dedication sermon contains a number of expressions reminiscent of the treatises *de avaritia* from around 379, which can, therefore, provide an indication of date.<sup>53</sup> This would imply that only at the end of his episcopate was the bishop able to rely on the adhesion of a group of Christians capable of financing the erection of a new religious building. Interestingly, the excavations in Verona since the early eighteenth century and especially the recent rediscovery of the remains of the first Paleochristian basilica enable us to compare Zeno's information with the archaeological evidence. Underneath the canonical church of St Helen and its cloister, two partly superimposed religious sites have been identified, which can be dated respectively to the mid-fifth century and to the time of Zeno's episcopate.<sup>54</sup> The latter exhibits two different construction phases, only the second of which reflects the final stage of the Zenonian cathedral:<sup>55</sup> three naves with a presbytery featuring a quadrangular podium fitted with an apse, with columns and capitals from other buildings and a mosaic floor with inscriptions praising the names of donors.<sup>56</sup> The bishop did not therefore succeed in erecting a new church, as would be the case in Milan and elsewhere a few years later, but only in embellishing and enlarging an existing one.

## II,1 CHRISTIANIZATION AND THE CONVERSION OF THE URBAN UPPER CLASSES

Aquileia offers an altogether different picture. Ancient sources celebrate the city as the first centre of westward expansion for Italian Christianity.<sup>57</sup> We find here many of the oldest examples of Christian architecture in the Po valley as well as, in the early aulæ (attributed to Theodore, Bishop of Aquileia, between 308 and 319), mosaics that point to a certain degree of Christianization of the upper classes. Over half of the basilical hall towards the north was paved, thanks to the generous contribution of a certain Ianuarius.<sup>58</sup> Of the rich mosaic floor of the southern aula three sections feature male and female busts with a well-characterized physiognomy, inscribed within medallions. Four of them are wearing the *encolpion* with the *bulla* hanging on the breast and the purple-hemmed tunic. The most reliable hypothesis is that they are neither martyrs nor members of the imperial family, but rather those members of Aquileia's municipal élite, promoted to the status of *clarissimi viri*, who participated in the construction of the church.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Zeno II, 6, 1, p. 168, 4-9.

<sup>52</sup> Zeno II, 6, 2, p. 168, 9-11. For the African situation, see Lepelley, *Les cités*, 348-52.

<sup>53</sup> Compare Zeno I, 5, 17-18, p. 41, 125-32 and II, 6, 5-7, p. 169, 39-57.

<sup>54</sup> *La cattedrale di Verona* (1987), 6-55.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 39. The identification of Zeno's church with the remains under the actual basilica (see P. Zovatto, 'Arte paleocristiana a Verona', in *Verona e il suo territorio* (1960), 555-74) is now known to be wrong.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.* 33, 54 where a good analysis of the remains of the mosaic floor can be found.

<sup>57</sup> S. Tramontin, 'Origini cristiane', in *Storia della cultura veneta dalle origini al Trecento I* (1976), 102-23.

<sup>58</sup> G. Brusin, P. L. Zovatto, *Monumenti paleocristiani di Aquileia e Grado* (1957), 52, fig. 21.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, 87; P. L. Zovatto, 'I ritratti musivi della basilica in Aquileia e una nuova proposta di identificazione', *Aquileia Nostra* 37 (1966), 106-7. H. Kaehler (*Die Stiftermosaiken in der Konstantinischen Sudkirche von Aquileia* (1962)) and F. Gerke (*Le sorgenti dell'arte cristiana* (1969)) suggest that these were the portraits of Constantine and his family. The same idea is repeated in *Da Aquileia a Venezia* (1980), 202-3.

These portraits, interpreted in the light of the inscriptions of Theodore and Ianuarius, refer to an euergetic context, corroborating the idea that the urban upper class started quite early to build churches rather than secular buildings in order to heighten their status within the community. Aquileia's example too confirms the similarity between pagan euergetism and Christian charity.<sup>60</sup>

Theodore's cult aulæ are also an indication of the bishop's position immediately after Constantine's edict of tolerance; some of the strongest economic groups of Aquileia were evidently ready to help the bishop in building a new church. Fortunatianus probably enlarged Theodore's northern aula around 350 due to an increase in the Christian community and to the importance he attached to keeping up the local tradition of constructing and adorning churches.<sup>61</sup> Then, at the end of the fourth century, the Church of Aquileia engaged in the construction of numerous other cult sites in relatively remote areas.

A sermon by Chromatius concerns the consecration of a new church in Concordia, when the town was made a bishopric<sup>62</sup> and was therefore in a position to start the Christianization process throughout the territory of the municipium along the right-hand side of the Tagliamento.<sup>63</sup> In Aquileia itself, the bishop, a friend and supporter of Ambrose, planned and started the construction of at least three churches, whose initial stages can be dated between the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century. We have no sermons about the consecration of the Aquileian churches, but we know that Chromatius started to build a church in Aquileia earlier than that at Concordia (Chrom., *S.* 26. 1, p. 92. 5-9). In Aquileia there are actually three Christian buildings one phase of whose construction can be dated towards the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century: the basilica at the Fondo Tullio alla Beligna, S. Giovanni and the Basilica di Monastero.<sup>64</sup>

The vast construction programme of Chromatius of Aquileia can compare with that of Ambrose in Milan. Ambrose, inspired by the famous Apostoleion in Constantinople, had erected the Basilica Apostolorum with a cross-shaped plan. Of the other two basilicae having a similar plan discovered in Milan, he probably completed the Basilica Nova and started to build the Virginum or San Simpliciano. After these examples, the cross-shaped plan can be found not only in churches in Northern Italy, but also beyond the Alps; it stood in particular for the idea of political victory obtained by the symbol of Christ's cross.<sup>65</sup>

Within Northern Italy, Milan and Aquileia are, however, somewhat of an exception. The cleverness and prestige of their bishops built upon the strategic role and economic strength of both cities following the bureaucratic reorganization after Diocletian. Aquileia was located at the centre of a complex road system linking it with other towns in the region and with the rest of Italy and with the north-western provinces.<sup>66</sup> The town's importance also increased when Milan became the residence of the emperor and his court.<sup>67</sup>

In both towns the Christianization process was making strides by c. 390 similar to what was happening to a lesser degree in other neighbouring towns. Concerted

<sup>60</sup> contra P. Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque, sociologie historique d'un pluralisme politique* (1976), 44-67.

<sup>61</sup> Thanks to the examination of ceramics under the floor, L. Bertacchi dated this enlargement of the first aulae to the mid-fourth century: 'Nuovi elementi ed ipotesi circa la basilica del Fondo Tullio', *Aquileia Nostra* 32-3 (1960-1), 47-80.

<sup>62</sup> Chrom., *S.* 26, 1 (*SC* 174, ed. J. Lemarié (1971), 92-3, 2-25).

<sup>63</sup> It is possible to date at the beginning of the fifth century the basilicas built in Iulium Carnicum and in Gradum: cf. Lizzi, op. cit. (n. 15), 157.

<sup>64</sup> cf. G. Brusin-P. L. Zovatto, *Monumenti romani e cristiani di Iulia Concordia* (1960), 143, 239, 271, 301 ff.; L. Bertacchi, 'Un decennio di scavi e scoperte d'interesse paleocristiano a Aquileia', *Antichità Altoadriatiche* 6 (1974), 63-91.

<sup>65</sup> There is an inscription written by Ambrose for the consecration of the Basilica Apostolorum in Milan

(*CIL* v, 2, p. 617), from which we can understand the twofold meaning of the cross for Ambrose: see M. Forlin Patrucco, 'Il tema politico della vittoria e della croce in Ambrogio e nella tradizione ambrosiana', in *Paradoxos Politeia. Studi patristici in onore di G. Lazzati* (1979), 410-13; F. Èla Consolino, 'Il significato dell'invenzione crucis nel *De obitu Theodosii*' *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia di Siena* 5 (1984), 161-80. For churches built beyond the Alps with a cross-shaped plan, cf. Pietri, 'L'èspace chrétien', op. cit. (n. 30), 182-4.

<sup>66</sup> S. Panciera, 'Strade e commerci tra Aquileia e le regioni alpine', *Antichità Altoadriatiche* 9 (1976), 153-72; L. Cracco Ruggini, 'Aquileia e Concordia: il duplice volto di una società urbana nel V sec. d.C.', *AAAd* 29 (1987), 57-97; G. Uggeri, 'La navigazione interna della Cisalpina in età romana', *AAAd* 29 (1987), 305-55.

<sup>67</sup> Ruggini, op. cit. (n. 40), 13-58.

action by Ambrose and the other bishops he had ably selected was beginning to bear fruit in terms of augmenting the power of the Church in the north of Italy. Ambrose's letters to the newly elected bishops and the latter's sermons confirm that the programme was successful insofar as it was aimed at converting the upper class which wielded the economic power in the city and could allocate part of it to the consolidation of the Church.

Born and educated into the senatorial class, Ambrose had acquired considerable bureaucratic and administrative experience in the years preceding his election. In his letters, in the *De Officiis* and in numerous other works published during his episcopate, he was committed to having the other bishops in Northern Italy adopt the conduct and language typical of the senatorial nobility. This contributed to setting on an equal footing the relationship between Church and State hierarchies and, in turn, to advancing the penetration of Christianity within the upper class. In this perspective, Ambrose urged his colleagues to improve their intellectual training.<sup>68</sup> In his letters to the newly-elected bishops, he did not fail to spell out what kind of sermons should be delivered in order to influence the audience: 'sint ergo sermones tui proflui, sint puri et dilucidi ut morali disputatione suavitatem infundas populorum auribus et gratia verborum tuorum plebem demulceas ut volens quo ducis sequatur'.<sup>69</sup> Their preaching had to adjust to the most diverse situations: sermons should urge, nourish like milk, assuage like ointment.<sup>70</sup> For intellectual vigour 'alloquia tua plena intellectus sint' would be instrumental in vanquishing heresy 'arma intellectus labia sapientis', strengthening the new creed and extending the bishop's guardianship over the populace.

Some of Ambrose's exhortations evidently took root: he had elected Felix Bishop of Comum and conveyed his approval to him for addressing those groups that he deemed vital for the consolidation of the Church in the towns: 'certe in illo ordine Comensium iam plerique coeperunt credere magisterio tuo et doctrina tua verbum Dei receperunt: sed qui dedit credentes, et adiutores dabit'.<sup>71</sup> Ambrose was evidently referring to the *ordo decurionum*, a heterogeneous group with deep social differences at the end of the fourth century, that still played a leading role in individual towns.<sup>72</sup> They had been agents of romanization among the people of North Italy, who were largely practising local pre-Roman cults,<sup>73</sup> and their devotion to traditional religion was the public expression of their political allegiance to Rome. Conversely, only their adhesion to Christianity could give the Church economic strength and increased prestige.

## II,2 THE IMPACT OF THE CONVERSION OF THE UPPER CLASSES ON CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Other bishops, however, tended to adopt a different tone when dealing with the same theme. A comparison of Gaudentius' and Maximus' sermons exhorting charity bears out an underlying division of opinion within the Church.

Gaudentius' *Tractatus*, so far almost unknown,<sup>74</sup> help us understand how the representatives of the church hierarchy stimulated the conversion of the leading members of their communities. Gaudentius, who had a vast knowledge of doctrine and was conversant with Greek and Hebrew, was elected by acclamation after a visit to the East and soon became famous for his sophisticated and eloquent sermons.<sup>75</sup> We possess the homilies he literally redrafted to meet a request by Benivolus, a devout

<sup>68</sup> Ambr., *Ep.* 2, 3-4, *PL* 16, 880; cf. *De Off.* 1, 101.

<sup>69</sup> Ambr. *Ep.* 2, 5, 880. As for the linkage *sermo purus et dilucidus*, reminiscent of the typical terminology of classical rhetorical treatises, cf. F. E. Consolino, *Ascesi e mondanità nella Gallia tardoantica* (1979), 24, n. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Ambr., *Ep.* 2, 6, 7, 880-1.

<sup>71</sup> Ambr., *Ep.* 4, 7, 891.

<sup>72</sup> R. P. Duncan-Jones, *The Economy of the Roman Empire. Quantitative Studies* (1974), 266-7; J. François, *Le privilège de liberté* (1984), 266-7.

<sup>73</sup> J. J. Hatt, 'Les divinités indigènes dans des dis-

tricts alpins à l'époque romaine (Alpes Grees et Pennines, Alpes Cottienes, Alpes Maritimes)', in *Atti del Centro Studi e Documentazione sull'Italia romana VII* (1975-76), 353-62; I. Chirassi Colombo, 'Acculturazione e morfologia di culti alpini', in *ibid.*, 157-91; G. B. Pascal, *The Cults of Cisalpine Gaul*, Collection Latomus 75 (1964).

<sup>74</sup> cf. S. Boehrer, *Gaudentius of Brescia: Sermons and Letters* (1965) and J. F. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A.D. 364-425* (1975), 185-6.

<sup>75</sup> Gaud. Brix., *Tr.* xvi, *PL* 20, 955-9.

person wishing to collect them.<sup>76</sup> This is all the more significant as Benivolus was not an ordinary citizen but a *magister memoriae*, a member of the local emerging classes.<sup>77</sup> *Caput honoratorum* in Brixia, he was also celebrated by the bishop as *caput dominicae plebis*: the Church claimed for the faithful a spiritual superiority commensurate with their social position.<sup>78</sup>

In order to encourage the conversion of the wealthier citizens, the bishops modulated their preaching, dealing in an appropriate fashion with the topics of wealth and alms-giving. Gaudentius, like Chromatius and Maximus, did not fail to urge the rich to give alms in line with the stoic-cynic literature which had dealt with issues related to poverty, exile and the benefits of a moderate life-style.<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, in order to allay the *dives*' concern that his *prosperitas* might lead to God's punishment, according to well-known Scriptural passages,<sup>80</sup> the bishop also supplied specific ideological underpinnings to the role of the *dives*: 'non malitiose, sed providenter te fecit Deus divitem, ut per opera misericordiae invenires peccatorum tuorum vulneribus medicinam'.<sup>81</sup> Admitting that wealth was providential in that it served to accomplish charitable deeds, the bishop's preaching thus played an important role in maintaining the balance of power in the society of late antiquity. As had been the case with the *orationes* by the more learned citizens of provincial towns, the bishop's sermons too supplied fresh ideological support for the economically and politically hegemonic groups by reaffirming their social function. This helped defuse the tensions caused by economic disequilibrium to the benefit of the Church, the new guarantor of social cohesion within the *civitas*.

Building upon the mentality of the aristocracy which he saw as being bent on material acquisition, Maximus of Turin indeed worked out a contractual concept of alms-giving whereby charitable deeds were calculated in terms of atonement and could redeem sin as a new baptism. Indeed, charity was more effective than baptism, in that it could be repeated.<sup>82</sup> We are far away here from the concept of baptism of Ambrose, Gaudentius, Chromatius and Zeno. Thus, only a few years after Ambrose's death, bishops inspired by him had developed a quite different concept of the Church. Moral tolerance towards converts coupled with harsh intransigence *vis-à-vis* religious minorities was the price the new institution paid for mass conversion.

Furthermore, in Maximus' perspective, charitable deeds were also an alternative to levies.<sup>83</sup> In a sermon he exposed the outrageous and abusive behaviour of military and civilian officials and stressed that the *praeda exactionis* made the tax burden unbearable.<sup>84</sup> This attitude suggests that the Church was willing to bear the latent strain between the hegemonic social groups and the State, in order not to alienate the former's sympathy.

### III.1 THE ROLE OF THE *DOMINI* IN THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

One of the tasks delegated to landowners by the Church was in fact the evangelization of the countryside. Between the late fourth and the early fifth century, there were still some manifestations of paganism in Turin. Maximus harshly condemns the *inreligiositas* of the people, who had conjured up archaic practices of exorcism during an eclipse of the moon.<sup>85</sup> At Christmas, even devout Christians, after the holy rites in church, celebrated 'cum gentilibus ebriosa kalendarum convivia'.<sup>86</sup> This did not happen, however, within the context of the *urbs*: 'procedunt ad campum<sup>87</sup>...extra civitatem ut auspicia colligant ominaque perquirant... Hoc etiam

<sup>76</sup> Gaud. Brix., *Praef.* 831-2, *CSEL* 68, 9, 10, p. 4.

<sup>77</sup> Ruf., *HE* II, 16, '(Benivolus) tunc memoriae scribiis praesidens'.

<sup>78</sup> Gaud. Brix., *Praef.* 828-9, *CSEL* 2, p. 1: 'nam sicut honoratorum nostrae urbis, ita etiam dominicae plebis, Domino annuente, dignissimum caput es.'

<sup>79</sup> Gaud. Brix., *Tr.* 13, 939, *CSEL* 23, pp. 120-1.

<sup>80</sup> Gaud. Brix., *Praef.* 834, *CSEL* 21, p. 7.

<sup>81</sup> Gaud. Brix., *Praef.* 835, *CSEL* 22, p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> Max. Taur. 61, 23-32, p. 244; 17, 70, p. 65; 36, 91,

p. 143, 61a, 17, p. 249; 72, 23, p. 301; 81, 19, p. 332; 93, 23, p. 374; 22, 1-10, p. 83; 22a, 67-79, p. 89: 'indulgentior est elemosina quam lavacrum. Lavacrum enim semel datur et semel veniam pollicitur, elemosinam autem quotiens feceris, totiens veniam promereris'.

<sup>83</sup> Max. Taur., 71, 44-54, p. 298; 56-74, p. 299.

<sup>84</sup> Max. Taur., 26, p. 101-3 esp., 40-54.

<sup>85</sup> Max. Taur., 30, 22-5, p. 117.

<sup>86</sup> Max. Taur., 61c, 64-75, pp. 258-9.

<sup>87</sup> Max. Taur., 63, 30-5, pp. 266-7.

malis suis addunt, ut quasi de auspicatione domum redeuntes ramusculos gestent in manibus scilicet pro omine, ut vel onusti ad hospitium redeant'.<sup>88</sup>

In the country, paganism was not confined to the occasional resurgence of 'superstition'. In the bishop's view, everything was contaminated by idolatry.<sup>89</sup> Ancient fertility rites were still practised, along with divinatory and sacrificial practices: the diabolic element arising out of them could, in Maximus' words, contaminate the entire agricultural production.<sup>90</sup> In Piedmont too country people preserved their devotion to a number of deities that retained Celtic attributes and functions, reinterpreted in relation to the Roman pantheon.<sup>91</sup> In a large area around the Verbaro, the Lario and the Alpine valleys, Minerva Medica or Memor was worshipped as a healing goddess, with inscriptions from the first to the third centuries A.D. ascribable only to slaves, *liberti* and women.<sup>92</sup> The cult of Victoria too had a non-official character: the goddess seems to have merged the functions of two Celtic deities, that had in turn superseded a multi-functional pre-Celtic deity. Several Roman deities—Mars, Hercules, Silvanus, Saturnus—were still worshipped with local attributes and functions linked to the previous religious substrata.<sup>93</sup> The cult of Diana too, of pre-Roman matrix, retained aspects more closely linked to the ritual of fertility.<sup>94</sup>

It is hard to say whether the survival of these cults in less thoroughly romanized areas is to be ascribed to *inertia*—'folklore' being basically impervious to change—or whether it reflected implicit opposition to Roman power and the ruling classes. It might be significant within this framework that the Church did not go directly to the eradication of paganism from the countryside, but delegated this task to the local *domini*.

Maximus' sermons allow us to see the arguments used to convince the *domini* to commit themselves to the work of Christianization. The *domini* had the duty to exercise control, because they would be held entirely responsible for idolatric practices on their estates.<sup>95</sup> The diabolical element contaminated not only the produce of the land but also the *conscientia* of the *possessores*.<sup>96</sup> According to Maximus, passive and collusive behaviour did not entail merely moral consequences. His terminology and the explicit reference to imperial legislation indicate that the bishop availed himself of state rules to force legal duties upon the *domini*. An edict of 392 envisaged equal fines for the *domini coniventes* and those who performed sacrifices.<sup>97</sup> For *coniventia* was what made *rei* those who did not act to prevent pagan rites from being celebrated on their estates.<sup>98</sup> As far as the enforcement of the law was concerned, the emperor was relying on supervision by *iudices*, *defensores*, and *curiales singularum urbium*. Many of Turin's landowners, who were urged by the bishop to apply straightforward coercion, must have held these very offices.<sup>99</sup>

We can explain Maximus' exhortation to adopt aggressive attitudes in order to eradicate the *error gentilium* in the countryside by taking into account the social status of the groups in question: conversion could be forced upon Turin's *rustici* without half-measures. Moreover, the Christians' new attitude reflected the degree of legitimacy achieved by the Church at the outset of the fifth century against the background of imperial legislation which consistently set forth and strengthened the Church's privileges.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Max. Taur., 98, 51–62, pp. 391–2.

<sup>89</sup> Max. Taur., 91, 23–38, p. 369.

<sup>90</sup> Max. Taur., 107, 23–30, p. 420; cf. 91, 33–6, p. 369.

<sup>91</sup> Pascal, op. cit. (n. 73), 47, 150–4; Chirassi Colombo, op. cit. (n. 73), 157–91.

<sup>92</sup> S. Roda, 'Religiosità popolare nell'Italia nord-occidentale attraverso le epigrafi cristiane nei secoli IV–VI', *Augustinianum* 21 (1981), 246–8, nn. 5, 9–16.

<sup>93</sup> The pre-Celtic deity became two deities in the Celtic pantheon: Cathubodua, the god of war, and Cantismerta, the god of sovereignty: Hatt, op. cit. (n. 73), 356–7.

<sup>94</sup> Max. Taur., 107, 32–40, p. 420. The term *dianaticus* could refer to the cult of Diana connected with farming rituals: J. Dölger, 'Christliche Grundbesitzer und heidnische Landarbeiter. Ein Ausschnitt aus der religiösen Auseinandersetzung des vierten und fünften Jahrhunderts', *Antike und Christentum* 6 (1950), 313–19.

<sup>95</sup> Max. Taur., 107, 14–21, p. 420.

<sup>96</sup> Max. Taur., 108, 7–8, p. 423.

<sup>97</sup> *CTh* 16, 10, 12, 11, 18–21.

<sup>98</sup> Max. Taur., 106, 13–18, p. 417.

<sup>99</sup> *CTh* 16, 10, 12, 11, 21–3; *S.* 106, 24–5, p. 417.

<sup>100</sup> *CTh* 16, 2, 29; 30; 11, 16, 21 and 16, 22; 16, 2, 31.

III,2 PAGANISM AND *RUSTICITAS*: THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN PAGANS AND CHRISTIANS IN THE VAL DI NON

In this context should be viewed Maximus' interpretation of the confrontation between pagans and Christians in the Val di Non in May 397. He wrote two sermons about the three Christian martyrs and aptly highlighted those details that best met his 'operational' aims.<sup>101</sup> In emphasizing the peculiar nature of martyrdom in times that were no longer those of the great persecutions, he described the *christiana devotio* of the martyrs not so much as passive acceptance of pagan aggression, but as an active testimony of *fides*. The paraenetic tone of the second sermon explains why the bishop adopted this interpretation: the martyrs of the Val di Non could be used as an example of missionary enthusiasm, of an unwavering will to attack and conquer the last pagan resistance.<sup>102</sup>

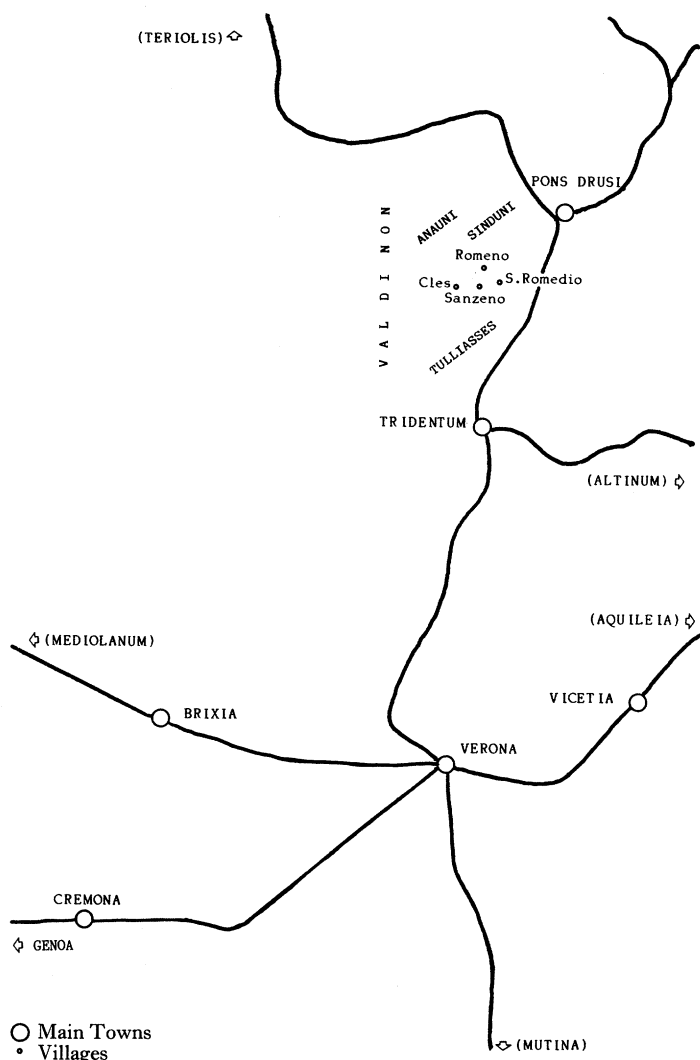


FIG. 2 THE VAL DI NON

<sup>101</sup> Max. Taur., 106–7 esp. 106, 2, pp. 417–18. For the authenticity of these sermons, cf. A. Mutzenbecher,

'Einleitung', *CCSL* 23, xxxiii ff.

<sup>102</sup> Max. Taur., 106, 22–35, p. 417.

It is noticeable that Maximus' reconstruction of the events is in accordance with the most recent interpretations, though differing from the account given by Vigilus, Bishop of Tridentum, who had sent the three priests to the Val di Non. Let us re-examine the sources and the evidence for the events, in order to separate out the facts and to understand what type of paganism was still so deeply rooted in that area close to Tridentum as to bring about the deaths of the priests.

The closest literary evidence consists of two letters Vigilus sent to Simplicianus of Milan and to John Chrysostom, then Bishop of Constantinople, accompanying the ashes of the three priests.<sup>103</sup> Both letters are pervaded by a clear hagiographic intention, in that Vigilus wanted to facilitate the canonization of the three martyrs. This influenced the two main elements of his account: the description of the place as a wild and remote area, inhabited by a *natio barbara* and *truculenta gentilitas* and the peaceful, non-aggressive spirit of the priests' mission.<sup>104</sup> Their patient endeavours, Vigilus wrote, were disrupted when they began to build a church and completely nullified when they tried to prevent a number of neophytes from committing apostasy by taking part in a purification procession organized by the *gentiles*.<sup>105</sup> On that occasion, only some of the most violent representatives of each group actually came to blows.<sup>106</sup> The day after, however, the pagans attacked the church, where the congregation was assembled, and the three priests were burnt in 'conspectu Saturni, idoli veteris tempestate longaeva', on stakes that had been prepared from beams from the roof of the church.<sup>107</sup>

The first inconsistency between Vigilus' account and the information we can derive from other sources concerns the description of the *rusticitas* of the local people. The inhabitants of the Val di Non who murdered the priests can be identified with the population granted full Roman citizenship by Emperor Claudius in A.D. 46. That measure had been justified by the close economic and legal integration of the Anauni within the municipium of Tridentum.<sup>108</sup> Thus the idea that at the time of Vigilus Rome's active interest in the Adige valley as well as the region's economic and political life had gone so far backwards that the region itself was again in a state of *rusticitas* must be ruled out. The Arrenii family, already known in Faventia, had set up important brick-production facilities in the valley.<sup>109</sup> Another wealthy family, the Raedonii, lived in Sanzeno, the village traditionally associated with the events.<sup>110</sup> The noble family of the Nonii Arrii Muciani too owned *praedia* in the area.<sup>111</sup> The presence of these important families can be viewed as an indication of the valley's degree of romanization.

Nevertheless, the increasingly defensive character of the villages after the loss of the Raetian provinces, and the persistence of paganism there might help explain Vigilus' description of the area as being remote from *civilitas*. To my mind it is, however, the very conception of *rusticitas* that needs reappraising. The co-existence of a large number of official Roman cults alongside more ancient ones would lead to the same conclusion.<sup>112</sup> There were numerous religious sites in the valley, the most important of which was Cles, where the *Tabula Clesiana* with five inscriptions dedicated to Saturn was found.<sup>113</sup> The discovery of a limestone *ara* and two further inscriptions to Saturnus in Romeno, east of Cles, suggests the presence of a temple of Saturn there too.<sup>114</sup> Finally, inscriptions dedicated to Mithras are so numerous, as

<sup>103</sup> Vig., *Epp.* I-II, *PL* 13, 549-58.

<sup>104</sup> Vig., *Epp.* I, 550D; II, 553B-C.

<sup>105</sup> Vig., *Epp.* II, 553C; I, 551C.

<sup>106</sup> Vig., *Epp.* II, 554D; I, 551D.

<sup>107</sup> Vig., *Epp.* II, 554B-555D; I, 552A.

<sup>108</sup> cf. *Tabula Clesiana* = *CIL* v, 5050 = *ILS* 206. The inscription was published by Th. Mommsen, 'Edikt der Kaisers Claudius über das röm. Bürgerrecht der Anauner vom J. 46 n. Chr.', *Hermes* 4 (1870), 99-120. Cf. U. Laffi, 'Adtributio' e 'Contributio'. *Problemi del sistema politico-amministrativo della Stato romano* (1966), 32 n. 63.

<sup>109</sup> E. Buchi, 'Nuove testimonianze degli Anauni',

*Studi Trentini di Scienze Storiche* 1 (1980), 85-97.

<sup>110</sup> P. Chisté, *Epigrafi trentine dell'età romana* (1971), 102-3.

<sup>111</sup> *CIL* v, 1 p. 339; F. Sartori, 'Verona romana' in *Verona e il suo territorio* (1960), 183, 245; M. A. Levi, 'Brescia romana: l'età imperiale', in *Storia di Brescia*, Brescia 1 (1963), 105-49.

<sup>112</sup> Among twenty five deities, as registered in inscriptions, only five indicate Celtic cults (e.g. Bergimus, Cavavius, Aponus): Chisté, op. cit. (n. 110), 245-7.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, 66-8; 72-80.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, 69-70.

compared to other areas of Cisalpine Gaul, that the killing of the three levites has been deemed to have a dimension related to Mithraic sacrifices.<sup>115</sup>

As for the Christianization of this area, I am inclined to believe that it was carried out with Ambrose's and not with Maximus' methods. Since the region was exposed to the threat of invasion, the social fabric of such villages as Sanzeno and Cles was certainly characterized by tension and disequilibrium. The gradual and moderate adoption of Christianization is made more credible by the presence of paganism not only among the *rustici*, but also among the *domini*. On the other hand, the bishop would not have dispatched three priests, one of them from Cappadocia, to a totally pagan area.<sup>116</sup> The most likely hypothesis, therefore, is that the three priests had been sent to the Val di Non to organize a not negligible group of Christians.<sup>117</sup> Each of them had his own function:<sup>118</sup> they were not monks looking for a hermitage, but clerics vested with specific functions within a partially converted community.

In this perspective, we can understand why the erection of a church compounded the tension between pagans and Christians. A physical building was the concrete sign of a creed strong enough to become institutionalized: 'longi temporis quieta conversatione compositi, dum nulla fidei utilitas titillaret. Verum nunc, si causa in Dominum surgentis odii requiratur, violatae pacis titulus fuit quia unus ex his... ecclesiam propriis sumptibus elevavit...'.<sup>119</sup> By organizing a pagan procession that mobilized the population, part of the Anaunian community aimed at showing the Christian group that it had retained its control over the community.

A less one-sided interpretation than that of Vigilius helps to overcome the inconsistency between the events *per se* and their aftermath: Augustine tells us that the culprits, who had been captured and sentenced to death, were saved by the bishop's intercession with the emperor.<sup>120</sup>

The events in Val di Non must have had considerable repercussions, and indeed the three murdered priests were soon worshipped as martyrs. But for all Vigilius' emphasis, these were not isolated events. Augustine relates that in peripheral locations, clashes between pagans and Christians often caused casualties. In Suffetula pagans slaughtered sixty Christians who had pulled down a statue of Hercules.<sup>121</sup> The violence in Calama around 409 must have resulted in many victims.<sup>122</sup> Here we find similarities with the events in Val di Non. In both cases, the confrontation was triggered off by a pagan ceremony, but there would have been no victims if the bishop had not urged the magistrates to enforce the law. In both cases the outbreak of violence occurred in the days following the pagan ceremony; the Christians were not responsible for provocations but tried to escape.<sup>123</sup> As far as Calama is concerned we know that the pagans had been exasperated by the threat that the bishop would obtain the enforcement of the recent anti-pagan laws against the organizers of the ceremony. From Augustine's letters we may infer that many local dignitaries were involved.<sup>124</sup> He was willing to ask the emperor to be lenient if the people really had become converts: 'animarum nos lucra ... hoc illo quaestuosius provenire'.<sup>125</sup> This sentence is reminiscent of Vigilius' remark at the end of his letter to Chrysostom: 'sed iam crescit [*sc.* Ecclesia] damno fecundior, letho vivacior, laetior post maerorem ... Hi sunt centuplicati reditus passionis'. It is likely that both in Calama and in the Val di Non pagans became Christians to escape death or the loss of their possessions.

In both cases the attack by the pagans was reported to the authorities immediately. In April 398 an imperial constitution addressed to Theodore was issued in

<sup>115</sup> F. Cumont, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mythra* (1894), I, 348; Pascal, *op. cit.* (n. 73), 66.

<sup>116</sup> Vig., *Ep.* II, 556B.

<sup>117</sup> *Ep.* II, 554B: 'ibique levitis aliquantis in ecclesia deprehensis...'

<sup>118</sup> *Sisinnius* was *diaconus* (554C); *Martyrius lector* (551A); *Alexander* was *hostarius* (551D).

<sup>119</sup> Vig., *Ep.* II, 553C; cf. I, 551C.

<sup>120</sup> Aug., *Ep.* 139, *CSEL* 44, pp. 151-2.

<sup>121</sup> Aug., *Ep.* 50, *CSEL* 34, 143 ff. That event has been dated c. 399 after the legislation concerning the

closure of pagan temples: Lepelley, *op. cit.* (n. 29), 355-8.

<sup>122</sup> Aug., *Epp.* 90 and 103 by Nectarius to Augustine and *Epp.* 91-104 to Nectarius. cf. T. Kotula, 'Deux pages relatives à la réaction païenne: les troubles à Sufes et à Calame', in *Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis* 205 (1974), 69-74 (in Polish with a French summary).

<sup>123</sup> Aug., *Ep.* 91, 433, 3-11.

<sup>124</sup> *Ep.* 103, 580, 9-11; 91, 434, 10-5.

<sup>125</sup> *Ep.* 91, 435, 11-5; 104, 594, 28 ff.



Milan: this law seems to be closely related to the events in Anaunia.<sup>126</sup> In its final section, the constitution deals with the situation in Africa and this has always been assumed to be its purpose. It was indeed reiterated in 409 upon Augustine's request against the Donatists.<sup>127</sup> But it is no coincidence that Augustine recalled the events in Val di Non in one of the first letters in which he wonders whether a bishop may ask the emperor to mitigate the sentence of death envisaged by the said constitution. The events there were for him a familiar precedent.<sup>128</sup> It may be assumed that the law in question was applied for the first time against the pagans of the Val di Non, or even that it was issued following Vigilius' report to the authorities.<sup>129</sup>

If this is correct, Vigilius' philanthropic attitude of asking that the convicted be pardoned after denouncing them to the authorities inevitably won many people to Christianity. The erection of a larger basilica dedicated to the three martyrs on the site of the previous one fostered the Christianization of the valley. In a traditionally sacred place, piety could be strengthened by the worship of the new saints which was so similar, in many respects, to that of the ancient pagan deities.<sup>130</sup>

The settlement of the conflict between pagans and Christians in Calama as well as the events in Val di Non shows how the alliance between the State and the Church had progressed. This alliance gradually brought to the fore the strategy of non-aggression and passive resistance which was among Ambrose's most important teachings. The bishops, aided by rigorous legislation, became the umpires over the multiple conflicts of their communities. Having inherited many of the values and powers that had been traditionally the prerogative of urban élites, they were now in a position to absorb the ideologically very profitable value of formal tolerance.

#### CONCLUSION

In this anti-idolatric literature of the early fifth century, the physiognomy of western paganism appears to be completely different from that indicated by a number of texts such as the *Carmen adversus paganos*, the *Poema ultimum*, or the *Carmen ad senatorem*,<sup>131</sup> all attacking the still widespread practice of oriental cults in Rome around 380. The deities mentioned in Maximus Gothicus' *Contra paganos*, for which the *terminus post quem* is 406,<sup>132</sup> are derived from the traditional pantheon (Iuppiter, Saturnus, Minerva, Diana), but strong emphasis is also placed on criticizing the worship of natural elements and on deriding the idols scattered around the countryside which are said to be covered with cobwebs and gnawed by the mice and unable to protect their worshippers from rain or from robbers.<sup>133</sup> Similarly, the rustic character of paganism in Gaul and Spain at the outset of the fifth century emerges from the letters written by Eutropius, an Aquitanian priest, to the Spanish lady Cerasia and in the poems by Endecheius, a Gallic poet. At the end of the fourth century, the latter celebrated in *De morte boum* the complete triumph of Christianity in the towns.<sup>134</sup>

This is consistent with the rustic connotation of paganism in the westernmost part of Northern Italy as revealed in Maximus' sermons and with the programmes of individual bishops in northern Italian towns in the second half of the fourth century. Their preaching, which was made consistent and homogeneous by their common Ambrosian inspiration and by the resolve to pursue the same ecclesiastical policies, was explicitly aimed at redirecting the resources of the wealthier citizens towards charity. Turning their traditional euergetism to Christian purposes, the bishops were

<sup>126</sup> *CTh* 16, 2, 31 (25 April 398).

<sup>127</sup> *Aug.*, *Epp.* 97 and 100.

<sup>128</sup> *Ep.* 139.

<sup>129</sup> The constitution was addressed to Manlius Theodorus, a person closely linked with the ecclesiastical milieu of Milan, and especially with Simplicianus, to whom Vigilius sent the first letter.

<sup>130</sup> The sites of the churches were planned strategically in order to assimilate a part of 'folkloric' culture within the ecclesiastical culture: see J. Le Goff, 'Cultura ecclesiastica e tradizione folcloristiche nella civiltà merovingia', in *Agiografia medievale* (1976), 215–26.

<sup>131</sup> L. Cracco Ruggini, 'Il paganesimo romano tra religione e politica (384–394 d.C.): per una reinterpretazione del "Carmen contra paganos"', *Atti dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei* s. VIII, vol. XXIII, 1 (1979), 124–30.

<sup>132</sup> M. Simonetti, in *CCSL* 20, x.

<sup>133</sup> Max. Goth., *Contra paganos*, *CCSL* 20, 323–8.

<sup>134</sup> P. Courcelle, 'Un nouveau traité d'Eutrope, prêtre aquitain vers l'an 400', *REA* 56 (1954), 377–90; J. Fontaine, 'Société et culture chrétiennes sur l'aire circumpyrénéenne au siècle de Théodose', *Bull. de Littérature ecclésiastique* 75 (1974), 241–86.

able to carry out a large building programme in the main bishoprics of the Annonarian Vicariate, erecting churches and chapels dedicated to martyrs over a relatively brief span of time. In this way the Church expanded its physical presence in the towns, increasing its potential for conversion, changing the appearance of the *civitas* of late antiquity and marking its evolution towards the forms of the early middle ages.

Possibly because it lacked adequate material and human resources, the Church attempted to delegate to the *domini* the task of converting the countryside. The Val di Non episode was an exception: in northern Italy it was the only case of a fight between pagans and Christians resulting in martyrdom. The Church immediately learnt that it was still dangerous to send to a rustic community extraneous members, evidently ignorant of local political and religious alliances. Elsewhere bishops preferred to ask the landowners to watch over the faith of their own farmers on the estates of the leading citizens, however the rural population retained its devotion to the official pagan deities, assigning them attributes and functions related to a pre-Roman cultural substrata. This is a sign that the faith of the *domini* was often a façade. Their Christianization progressed as a function of the Church's ability to obtain the support of and become locally as powerful as the State or, even, to take over its role. So, they preferred to involve themselves in a church-building programme in the town rather than in a missionary Christianization of the country areas.

In this sense, formal acceptance of Christianity could also result in its opposite, if the interests at stake so required. We have no direct evidence of the responsibility of other non-rustic groups for the conflict between pagans and Christians in Val di Non; still, the outcome of those events, as Augustine relates, with the bishop asking the emperor to pardon the culprits would suggest that not only the members of a *natio barbara* but, as had been the case in Calama, also leading land-owning citizens were involved in the clashes on the side of the pagan *rustici*.

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