

# CONTESTING THE ERASURE OF PAGANISM: CLAUDIAN AND CHRISTIANIZATION AT THE COURT OF HONORIUS

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BENJAMIN KYBETT\*

## **Abstract**

*Recent scholarship has argued that we should not seek to identify the production or enjoyment of classical or classicising literature in Late Antiquity with a pagan religious identity. The following chapter argues that this approach, while in many respects accurate, risks erasing entirely the link between mythological literature and pagan religion. It takes the example of the poet and orator Claudian, arguing that this pagan author was able to produce literature that both satisfied the Christian regime of the day while also allowing for potential pagan religious readings.*

## **I. Introduction: Christianization and the Erasure of Paganism**

Christianization is, along with the fall of the Western Empire, the great narrative of late Roman history. If Late Antiquity primarily denotes the era of transition between the classical world and the medieval, then the rise of Christianity to social, cultural, intellectual, and political dominance is perhaps its most significant aspect. Christianization was all-encompassing, affecting and often restructuring a great many areas of life. “Erasure” is a useful concept through which to approach this theme. One of the principal ways in which Christianization manifested itself was in the removal of traditional religion from its place of primacy in Roman society, politics, and culture – an “erasure” of the historical links to

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\* Independent Scholar, United Kingdom.

paganism of the Roman state, or of classical culture.<sup>1</sup> It is on these latter two aspects that I will focus in this chapter. Christianization often seems a rather one-sided story, with Christians, especially emperors and bishops, as the protagonists reshaping the Roman world. Even those recent accounts that have focused more on the pagan perspective, such as Alan Cameron's *Last Pagans of Rome* or Edward Watts's *Final Pagan Generation* have portrayed fourth-century pagans fading rather wanly away in the last decades of the fourth century, in the face of an unstoppable tide of triumphalist Christianity. In this chapter, I wish to explore the ways in which pagans could resist this fate, the ways they contested and rejected the erasure of paganism, and the ways they asserted the historic significance and continuing relevance of traditional religion. In doing so, I do not intend to retread the "pagan revival" narrative popular in the mid-twentieth century, nor the notion of pagans as a coherent social, cultural, and political faction in constant conflict with their Christian peers, against which Cameron has so comprehensively argued.<sup>2</sup> But I

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<sup>1</sup> It has been questioned in recent decades whether (a) it is appropriate to refer to adherents of traditional Graeco-Roman religion as "pagans;" and (b) whether it is even meaningful to think of these often extremely disparate individuals and groups as co-religionists at all. I cannot here treat this subject in detail; in short, I concur with those scholars who have concluded that it is in both cases acceptable, where appropriately caveated. See Neil McLynn, "Pagans in a Christian Empire," in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 573; Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14-32; Mattias Gassman, *Worshippers of the Gods: Debating Religion in the Fourth-Century Roman West*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). I broadly follow the recent "sociological" approach to religious identity, which understands it as one of a number of social identities that may or may not be "activated" or "given salience" depending on the situation, propounded in works such as Isabella Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Éric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200-450 CE* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). These approaches allow us to see "pagans" as a real religious group, not simply the construction of a polemical Christian dichotomy, while accepting that "pagans" were not all these people were, that they did not "act" as pagans at all times and in all situations (still less a "pagan faction"), and that pagans and Christians had much, perhaps everything, in common except religion.

<sup>2</sup> For the "pagan revival," see the classic statements in Herbert Bloch, "A New Document of the Last Pagan Revival in the West, 393-394 A.D.," *Harvard Theological Review* 38.4 (1945), 199-244 and Herbert Bloch, "The Pagan Revival in the West at the End of the Fourth Century," in *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. Arnaldo Momigliano (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 193-218. Anglophone scholarship now usually, with Cameron, rejects this narrative, but it has been defended

wish to show the subtle ways in which a pagan could resist attempts to erase their religion, while remaining entirely loyal to (and indeed, taking an active role in) the Christian imperial regime.

There is, furthermore, a temptation to see the process of Christianization teleologically. With the exception of the brief, if spectacular, interlude under Julian, the course of the rise of Christianity and the dwindling of paganism seems to run smooth from the conversion of Constantine to the Byzantine Empire of Justinian and medieval Christendom beyond. As Peter Brown puts it, however, fourth-century pagans did not have the benefit of modern historians “to spell out for them the writing on the wall for a whole, non-Christian way of life and worship.”<sup>3</sup> Efforts to resist the erasure of paganism from politics, culture, and society might, we know, be doomed, but resist they did: in overt ways such as the appeals to tradition and to tolerance exemplified by Symmachus’s *Relatio* 3 or Libanius’s *Or.* 30, “For the Temples,” or by the occasional spasms of localized sectarian violence that mark this period.<sup>4</sup> They could also do so in quieter ways, by asserting the links between Rome and the pagan past, by questioning Christian attempts to erase the links between classical culture, and traditional religion.

It is these later approaches that I explore in this paper. I take as my example the poet and orator Claudian, active at the court of the emperor Honorius and his *de facto* regent, the general Stilicho, in the last years of the fourth century and the first years of the fifth. I shall argue that the religious significance of Claudian’s rich, classicizing verse has been under-appreciated by scholarship (and thus, I argue, modern historiography has followed late antique Christians in erasing the continuing religious power of classical culture). I demonstrate that Claudian asserts the links between classical culture, *Romanitas*, and pagan religion against the erasure attempted by Christian triumphalists, and in

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by, for example, Stéphane Ratti, *Polémiques entre païens et chrétiens*, (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012) and is maintained by Paul Veyne, *Quand notre monde est devenu chrétien (312 – 394)*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 32.

<sup>4</sup> On pagan religious violence in the fourth century, see Michele Salzman, “Rethinking Pagan–Christian Violence” in *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices*, ed. Harold Drake (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 273-274; Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 244-259.

particular his rival poet Prudentius, while remaining a loyal panegyrist glorifying the Honorian regime. There are three main sections: in the first I introduce Claudian and his place in the historiography of Christianization; the second examines Claudian's references to those most redolent symbols of classical culture, the Muses, and to the Latin poetic tradition more generally; in the third I examine Claudian's conception of *Romanitas*, and in particular his presentation of the personified goddess Roma. I conclude by considering what Claudian's works tell us about the contestation of erasure in Late Antiquity.

## II. Claudian and the Historiography of Christianization

Claudius Claudianus flourished briefly but spectacularly. His origins were in the Greek East, in Egypt, probably Alexandria.<sup>5</sup> He first appears in the historical record on New Year's Day, 395, when he delivered a consular panegyric in Rome for Probinus and Olybrius, two brothers of the aristocratic Anicii family. Thereafter, he rapidly entered the service of the young western emperor, Honorius and, the real power at the imperial court, Stilicho. Over the next nine years, he produced a very substantial body of poetry written explicitly in praise of his political benefactors, his *Carmina maiora*: consular panegyrics, wedding poems, epic reinventions of Stilicho's military success, invectives against the regent's enemies on the imperial stage. These poems, performed before the court and elite audiences in Milan and Rome, form a continuous narrative of glorification for the Honorian-/Stilichonian-regime.<sup>6</sup>

Claudian, our best evidence attests, was (and was generally known as) a pagan. He is referred to by Augustine, who was familiar with his verse, as a "stranger to the name of Christ (*a Christe nomine alienus*)," and by

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<sup>5</sup> Claudian's Alexandrian origins are suggested by *Carm. min.* 19.3; 22.20, 56-58.

<sup>6</sup> Claudian's *Carmina maiora* were delivered in Milan, where Honorius held court for most of this period, with the exception of *PandO* (before he became attached to the imperial court), *Stil. 3*, *Get.* and *VI Cons.* which were delivered in Rome. These two locations imply overlapping, but slightly different audiences – the "service aristocracy," the imperial bureaucracy, likely predominating in Milan, compared to the ancient, traditionalist aristocracy of Rome. On the distinction between these two groups, see Michele Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), esp. 39-43 and Cameron, *Last Pagans*, 11-12.

Orosius as “a most obstinate pagan (*paganus pernicacissimus*).”<sup>7</sup> He did write a poem on a Christian theme, *De Salvatore* (= Carm. min. 32), a miniature Easter hymn, reflecting on the mysteries of the Incarnation, but the text itself reveals this to be a court commission, and it need not be taken as a personal statement of faith any more than the mythological writings of poets such as Ausonius or Sidonius need cast doubt on their Christian beliefs.<sup>8</sup> He also wrote *In Iacobum* (=Carm. min. 50), which makes light of the devotion of the Christian *magister equitum* Jacobus to the cult of saints.<sup>9</sup> This identification of Claudian’s religious allegiances, while not beyond doubt, has been generally accepted.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this, Claudian’s paganism has not played a significant role in the interpretation of his poetry – at least since the publication in 1970 of Alan Cameron’s monograph on Claudian.<sup>11</sup> The influence of Cameron’s reading has been profound, particularly in Anglophone scholarship. Cameron’s approach is built around two connected hypotheses: firstly, that Claudian’s political poetry is “propaganda” on behalf of Stilicho and his regime, and the content of these works aims not only to glorify the general, but to communicate and win adherence to his political program; secondly, since Claudian was working on behalf of a Christian regime, the extensive classicizing and mythological material in his poetry is of no

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<sup>7</sup> Aug., *Civ. Dei*. 5.26; Orosius 7.35.21. Augustine goes on in this passage to quote verbatim (though with an elision) from *III Cons.* If (as seems likely), Orosius is following Augustine’s information, this suggests that “*a Christe nomine alienus*” meant “pagan,” rather than someone whose Christianity the bishop of Hippo considered doubtful; cf. also Aug., *Enchiridion* 1.4, which contrasts “*a Christe nomine alienus*” and “*haereticus*.”

<sup>8</sup> The poem ends (lines 20-21) with a blessing on the emperor.

<sup>9</sup> On this text, see John Vanderspoel, “Claudian, Christ, and the Cult of Saints,” *Classical Quarterly* 36 (1986), 244-255; Franca Ela Consolino, “Poetry and Politics in Claudian’s *Carmina minora* 22 and 50,” in *Aetas Claudiana*, ed. Widu-Wolfgang Ehlers, Fritz Felgentreu and Stephen M. Wheeler (Munich: Saur, 2004). Alan Cameron, *Poetry and Propaganda: Claudian at the Court of Honorius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 225 is no doubt right to emphasize that the poem need not indicate a particularly profound opposition either to the cult of saints or Christianity more generally, and seems to suggest more of a literary dispute than a religious controversy (see line 2, in which Claudian calls upon Jacobus not to “tear to pieces” his verse); nonetheless it is striking that Claudian chooses to retort on religious grounds, and take such levity with something sacred to many Christians.

<sup>10</sup> The classic discussion is Cameron, *Poetry and Propaganda*, 189-192. Followed in recent scholarship, for example, Gillett, “Epic Panegyric,” 270 n. 13, 287; Clare Coombe, *Claudian the Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Cameron, *Poetry and Propaganda*.

particular religious significance. This was an early piece of Cameron's wider project, culminating in his monograph *The Last Pagans of Rome*, that aims to refute the link that had been propounded in earlier scholarship between fourth-century classicizing culture and pagan religiosity, and to refute the idea of a "pagan revival" in this period.<sup>12</sup> This interpretation of Claudian remained Cameron's view through to the publication of *Last Pagans*, and it has remained the standard approach, at least in the anglophone sphere.<sup>13</sup> The approach particularly in French and Italian scholarship has been more varied, and recently, in differing ways, Philip Hardie and Gabriela Ryser have paid more attention to questions of religion; nonetheless, Cameron's approach continues to dominate.<sup>14</sup>

Cameron's argument stems from the recognition that the majority of elite Christians in the fourth century had no difficulty with classical culture, even those elements that referred explicitly to traditional divinities or to the trappings of pagan religion. Despite the well-documented anxieties of some of their ecclesiastical peers, elite education remained throughout this period dominated, indeed, defined, by induction into the classics – familiarity with and appreciation of Homer, Virgil, Plato, and Cicero was how one demonstrated one's social status,

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<sup>12</sup> On the "pagan revival," see above n. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 207-208. Those who have followed this view include: Michael Roberts, "The Use of Myth in Latin *Epithalamium* from Statius to Venantius Fortunatus," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 119 (1989), 335-336; Michael Dewar, *Claudian, Panegyricus De Sexto Consulatu Honorii Augusti: Edited with introduction, translation and literary commentary*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), xx-xxi; Catherine Ware, *Claudian and the Roman Epic Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 48-53; Coombe, *Claudian*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> In continental scholarship, see particularly the works such as Isabella Gualandri, "Il classicismo Claudiano: aspetti e problemi," in *Metodologie della ricerca storica sulla tarda antichità*, ed. Antonio Garzya (Naples: D'Auria, 1989), 25-48; more recently Isabella Gualandri, "Claudian in Context: Reflections on a Historiographical Controversy," in *The Strange Death of Pagan Rome: Reflections on a Historiographical Controversy*, ed. Rita Lizzi Testa (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 141-149; Jean-Louis Charlet, "Claudien chantre païen de *Roma Aeterna*," *Koinonia* 37 (2013): 255-269. For a different approach, maintaining the "pagan revival" argument *contra* Cameron, see Stéphane Ratti, *Antiquus error: Les ultimes jeux de la résistance païenne*. *Scripta varia augmentés de cinq études inédites*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 281-289. The recent, more religiously attuned readings of Claudian in English are Philip Hardie, *Classicism and Christianity in Late Antique Latin Poetry* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019) and Gabriela Ryser, *Education, Religion, and Literary Culture in the 4th Century CE: A Study of the Underworld Topos in Claudian's De Raptu Proserpinae* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2020).

not one's religious affiliations. As Cameron puts it in one article, "classical culture, culture based on the poets and ancient mythology, was the only culture there was."<sup>15</sup> Thus "pagan imagery," representations of the gods and mythological events and characters, in Claudian and elsewhere were "purely literary," aestheticized, even "secularized," antiquarian rather than representing a living religious tradition.<sup>16</sup>

A comparison may be made with the visual arts, in which sphere Christians of the late fourth century were explicit in erasing the potential religious meanings of, say, mythological statuary and instead valued it for its artistic merit. The Christian poet Prudentius, a contemporary of Claudian, wrote in his verse polemic *Contra Symmachum*,

I wish you now to put aside childish festivals, ridiculous rites and shrines unfitting for such a kingdom. Wash the marble stained with dripping blood, nobles; let pure statues, the works of great artists (*artificum magnorum opera*), be allowed to rest; these are to be the most beautiful ornaments of our land, and polluted usage ought not to corrupt the monuments of art (*monumenta... artis*), which were turned to vice.<sup>17</sup>

In the domestic sphere, the famous Projecta Casket in the British Museum, an ornate piece in silver, produced in the second half of the fourth century, combines pagan imagery (including a nude Venus) with the inscription "*Secunde et Projecta vivatis in Christe*," illustrating that such

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<sup>15</sup> Alan Cameron, "Poetry and Literary Culture in Late Antiquity," in *Approaching Late Antiquity: The Transformation from Early to Late Empire*, ed. Simon Swain and Mark Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 343.

<sup>16</sup> "Purely literary." Cameron, *Last Pagans*, 207-208. By "pagan imagery" and similar terminology used throughout, I mean depictions of gods and other mythological figures associated with traditional religion; the question of their relation to pagan religion being precisely the one under discussion.

<sup>17</sup> Prud., *C. Symm.* 1.499-505. Cf. the decree issued by Theodosius I, *CTh* 16.10.8, which declares that former cult statues ought to be "valued for their art rather than their divinity (*artis pretio quam divinitate metienda*)." Note also the growth of trends such as museological collections of mythological statuary, see for example Sarah Bassett, "Excellent Offerings: The Lausus Collection in Constantinople," *The Art Bulletin* 82.1 (2000), 6-25; Robert Coates-Stephens, "Statue Museums in Late Antique Rome," *Archeologia Classica* 68 (2017), 309-342.

imagery need not have troubled a Christian patron.<sup>18</sup> This reorientation of the classical past in both art and literature, stripping it of its religious meanings, and incorporating it into an emerging Christian society and culture, was a vital aspect of fourth-century Christianization. Only by erasing its sense of the numinous could pagan imagery be incorporated into a Christianized Roman society. These arguments have been very valuable, particularly in demonstrating that fourth-century Roman society was not split into cultural silos, fighting a religious “Cold War.” Far more united elite Romans, pagan and Christian, than divided them.<sup>19</sup>

But this view does not, I submit, tell us the whole story. A dichotomy between the “religious” and “literary” is an unhelpful one. Doubtless, even before the fourth century, the relationship between Roman religion and mythological literature was a complex and elusive one.<sup>20</sup> The skepticism even of adherents of traditional religion to the *fabulae poetarum* is well known, before and after the fourth century. Cameron comments that “in literature the old mythology had long since become merely decorative, and in any case bore so little relationship to contemporary paganism that none but a few extremists gave its pagan associations a thought.”<sup>21</sup> Mythological poetry, even that produced by revered authors such as Virgil, was clearly not regarded as the “canonical” vessel of divine revelation and salvation in anything like the same sense that the texts of the Old and New Testaments were by Christians. It is usually supposed that the Roman elites were too sophisticated to believe in the often scurrilous tales the poets told about the gods – and indeed these tales

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<sup>18</sup> See Alan Cameron, “The Date and Owners of the Esquiline Treasure,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 89.1 (1985), esp. 143-144; Jaś Elsner, “Visualising Women in Late Antique Rome: The Projecta Casket,” in *Through a Glass Brightly: Studies in Byzantine and Medieval Art and Archaeology, Presented to David Buckton*, ed. Chris Entwistle (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2003), 22-36; David Gwynn, “The ‘End’ of Roman Senatorial Paganism,” in *The Archaeology of Late Antique Paganism*, ed. Luke Lavan and Michael Mulryan (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 152-153. Cosetta Cadau, “Female Characterization and Gender Reversal in Nonnus and Colluthus,” in *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context III: Old Questions and New Perspectives*, ed. Filip Doroszewski and Katarzyna Jazdzewska (Boston: Brill, 2020), 259-260 makes an interesting comparison between the Casket and Claudian’s *epithalamium* for Honorius and Maria.

<sup>19</sup> See for example, Robert Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 12-13.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance Roberts, “The Use of Myth,” 335-336 on the “secularization” of mythology in Latin *epithalamia*.

<sup>21</sup> Cameron, *Poetry and Propaganda*, 199.



were generally regarded allegorically.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, Denis Feeney has argued convincingly that the opposition of mythological literature to “real” Roman religion is an unhelpful one: different modes of religious expression were available, and literature could be numinous even if it did not correspond to, for example, ritual practice.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the question of whether members of the elite “believed” in the gods of their poetry is not particularly relevant. With regards to Virgil, Feeney comments helpfully that,

We must recognise that there was no one homogeneous background of “belief” for the poem to map itself onto in order to succeed. The variety of ways of talking about the divine which the poem assumes in its audience, and uses itself, is so diverse that it means virtually nothing to ask the question: ‘Did Vergil’s audience believe in the gods of the *Aeneid*?’<sup>24</sup>

It is of course the case that four hundred years separate Claudian from the texts and authors which Feeney discusses. But the arguments hold true for paganism – and in particular, the paganism of the Roman elite – in the fourth century. Firstly, the paganism of Claudian’s milieu was specifically and consciously traditionalist and antiquarian; it had not changed into a “propositional” religion centered around a creed or belief in a sacred text.

Moreover, the main change that had occurred since the Augustan period was the rise of Christianity. The coming of Christianity and the various complex Christian responses (some of which are discussed below) to classicizing and mythological literature would, if anything, make late antique pagans only more attuned to the religious dimensions of these works. Christians had “raised the question” of the religious significance of literature in a more direct and explicit way than had been the case in previous centuries. The fact that they were still used and

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<sup>22</sup> Claude Lepelley, “The Use of Secularised Latin Pagan Culture by Christians,” in *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity*, ed. David Gwynn and Susanne Bangert (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 479; Ryser, *Education, Religion, and Literary Culture*, 34-37.

<sup>23</sup> Denis Feeney, *Literature and Religion at Rome: Cultures, Contexts, and Beliefs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Denis Feeney, *The Gods in Epic: Poets and Critics of the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 180; see also the comments of Ryser, *Education, Religion, and Literary Culture*, 37-38.

appreciated by Christians does not mean that they could not also be a locus of pagan religion. The Christian debate about the religious significance of classical culture was not conducted in isolation. It would have made all educated observers, pagans as well as Christians, alive to the religious possibilities inherent in literature.

By focusing on the undeniable fact that Christians had erased the religious implications of classical and classicizing literature, recent scholarship has neglected the perspective of pagans in this Christianizing society. As Neil McLynn comments, “[h]aving overcome earlier tendencies to see all pagan images as symbols of anti-Christian defiance, we have perhaps become overhasty in denying them any numinous qualities.”<sup>25</sup> In trying to ascertain whether these texts have a “religious significance,” the possibility that this is a question with more than one answer has been neglected. Such an approach comes naturally to historians of the visual arts; as Jaś Elsner writes, for example, “the Christianity or paganness of a work of art lay not in its iconography but in how its viewer chose to see it.”<sup>26</sup>

But the potential for religious ambivalence in late antique literature has been acknowledged much less. Contemporary scholarship has, in a sense, followed fourth-century Christians in the erasure of potential pagan religious meaning from classicizing texts, a historiographical erasure compounding that which was the result of Christianization. By demonstrating the viability of a religious reading of Claudian’s *Carmina maiora*, I will in the following sections show how Claudian went about fighting the political and cultural erasure of paganism. I will show how Claudian writes “ambivalently,” so as to allow his audience to understand and create a moment of religious contestation with the Christian triumphalism of figures such as Prudentius and Ambrose, while also allowing a non-religious reading. Through this ambivalence, Claudian was able to contest Christianization, while remaining a loyal panegyrist of the Christian regime.<sup>27</sup> Claudian’s ambivalence allowed his audience to accept or ignore the religious aspect of his works as they preferred.

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<sup>25</sup> Neil McLynn, “Pagans in a Christian Empire,” 585.

<sup>26</sup> Jaś Elsner, “Art and Architecture,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History, vol. XIII: The Late Empire, A.D. 337-425*, ed. Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 747.

<sup>27</sup> Contesting “Christianization” is of course not the same as contesting Christianity, and there may well have been many members of the elite who were uninterested in, or actively opposed to, the erasure of paganism from politics and culture. It seems, for example, that

I argue that Claudian intentionally employed this religious ambivalence. It is of course true that understanding the aims and motivations of any ancient author, particularly one who is as biographically elusive as Claudian, is a challenge, and that our statements in this regard will always be to a certain extent speculative. I approach Claudian not just as a poet but as a political actor, delivering his compositions in the charged environment of the Honorian court, with the aim of achieving a certain set of political objectives. Claudian would have had to consider closely the effect his delivery would have on his audience. And, as we read these passages where Claudian seems to be engaging polemically with Prudentius and other Christian authors, I think it legitimate to ask why he does so; what he hopes to accomplish; what his intention is. We cannot gaze into Claudian's soul, but in the following pages I construct a reading which I believe provides the most convincing explanation of a number of aspects of Claudian's work, and suggests how he wanted it to be received by its first audience.

### III. Fighting Erasure: The Classical Tradition

Reading Claudian's poetry in isolation, it can be easy to forget that an entire lifetime, more than eighty years, had passed since the conversion of Constantine. The *Carmina maiora* are almost entirely without reference to the Christianity.<sup>28</sup> Whether or not Claudian is part of a distinct late antique poetics, in terms of its cultural and religious frame of reference, a casual reader would be entirely unaware that anything had changed from the pre-Christian period. It is, however, only by reading Claudian against the background of developments in Christian poetry, before and during his lifetime, that key elements of his approach to religion, become salient. In particular, Claudian's writing is constructed in (sometimes direct) contrast with that of the Christian poet and statesman Prudentius,

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a number of Christians supported pagan attempts to restore the Altar of Victory, a potent symbol of the links between the state and traditional religion, to the Roman *curia*; Ambrose complains of them bitterly; see for example Ambrose, *Ep.* 72.8; *de ob. Val. Jun.* 19.

<sup>28</sup> Only one convincing suggestion has been made of an overt Christian allusion; the imagined labor of the empress Maria depicted in *Stil.* 2.341-343, where the phrase *sacri Mariae partus* might be thought to refer to Mary's bearing of Christ. The comparison is not taken any further however, and the rest of the scene is entirely classical, with reference to Lucina, the goddess of childbirth; see Cameron, *Poetry and Propaganda*, 219.

who was active in court circles in Italy at roughly the same time as his younger Alexandrian rival.<sup>29</sup> They were clearly aware of one another's work, with numerous allusions running between them.<sup>30</sup> Prudentius's poetic project was explicitly Christianizing, and his oeuvre includes a work of anti-pagan polemic, as well as hymns of praise to God, Christ, and various martyrs.<sup>31</sup> He represents a "triumphalist" strain of Christian thought and writing, which saw the post-Constantinian Roman Empire as fundamentally Christian, and wanted a rapid and aggressive erasure of paganism from the political sphere (and indeed, as we saw from his thoughts on classical statuary above, from art and culture too). In an important recent monograph, Philip Hardie demonstrates the value of reading in parallel the "Christian" and "classical" poetry of Latin Late Antiquity, including Claudian and Prudentius, elucidating the way in which they draw on similar themes and imagery, but turning them to very different ends.<sup>32</sup> In this section, I build on this approach, turning it more directly to questions of religion.<sup>33</sup>

The Muses, those goddesses who above all symbolize the classical tradition, provide a useful case through which to study this dynamic. The Muses had, of course, been the divine source of inspiration for poets since the earliest days of Graeco-Roman literature.<sup>34</sup> Claudian continues

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<sup>29</sup> Prudentius's time in Italy likely ran contemporaneously with Claudian. On Prudentius's career, see Altay Coşkun, "Zur Biographie des Prudentius," *Philologus* 152.2 (2008), 294-319; Gerard O'Daly, *Days Linked by Song: Prudentius' Cathemerinon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1-5; Aaron Pelttari, *The Psychomachia of Prudentius: Text, Commentary, and Glossary* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), 1-9.

<sup>30</sup> For an extensive, but not exhaustive, catalogue, see Lukas Dorfbauer, "Claudian und Prudentius: Verbale Parallelen und Datierungsfragen," *Hermes* 140 (2012), 45-70. The dating of Prudentius's poems is uncertain, so it is often difficult to establish chronologically which poet is citing the other (the fact that he is not mentioned in Jerome's *De viris illustribus* suggests that Prudentius was not known as a poet before c.392/393; O'Daly, *Days Linked by Song*, 9-10).

<sup>31</sup> Prudentius summarizes his poetic project, to "praise God with voice" (*voce Deum concelebrat*) at *Præfatio* 34-42.

<sup>32</sup> Hardie, *Classicism and Christianity*.

<sup>33</sup> Hardie engages very little with the question of religious identity; he is for example non-committal as to whether Claudian was in fact a pagan (88), though he does suggest that the Alexandrian's poetry might have a "playfully polemic edge" (146).

<sup>34</sup> On the Muses and the classical tradition, see Graham Wheeler, "Sing, Muse...: The introit from Homer to Apollonius," *Classical Quarterly* 52.1 (2002), 33-49; Penelope Murray, "The Muses and their Arts," in *Music and the Muses: The Culture of Mousikē in the Classical Athenian City*, ed. Penelope Murray and Peter Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University

this tradition, frequently invoking the Muses as the source of his inspiration, for example in *PandO*, where he exclaims: “You, Parnasia, I pray, teach an ignorant poet which god provides such a gift to both [brothers].”<sup>35</sup> A lengthier passage in the preface to *Ruf. 2* associates the Muses directly with the return to peace Stilicho has achieved after the downfall of his rival Rufinus:

Throw open now protected Helicon, sister Muses, where you will return. It is now permitted for you to go once again in chorus. No one forbids song with the mean bellowing of hostile trumpets throughout the Aonian fields. You, Delian Apollo, untroubled now that fear has been banished from Delphi, crown your avenger with flowers. No one drinks the Castalian waters or the prophetic streams of the oracle with polluting barbarian lips.<sup>36</sup>

Read in isolation, these passages seem unremarkable, even bland, entirely traditional invocations of the Muses as the source of poetic inspiration and as symbols of classical culture and its associated blessings.

It is only when one takes into account the context of a Christianizing cultural landscape that they begin to take on more complex dimensions. Late fourth-century Milan was not Hesiod’s Mount Helicon, and the Muses were not uncontroversial or uncontested figures. A number of Christian poets of the fourth century replace the Muses with Christ. Juvencus, who retold the Gospels in epic verse during Constantine’s reign, includes an invocation to the Holy Spirit in his preface: “Therefore, move, sanctifying Spirit, author of my poem, be near to me, and sweet Jordan, water my mind with your pure streams as I sing, so that we may speak worthily of Christ.”<sup>37</sup> Proba’s retelling of the Gospels in Virgilian cento is more explicit: “I do not wish to lead the Muses from the Aonian

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Press, 2004), 365-389; Penelope Murray, “The Muses in Antiquity,” in *The Muses and their Afterlife in Post-Classical Europe*, ed. Kathleen Christian, Clare Guest, and Claudia Wedepohl (London: The Warburg Institute, 2014), 13-32.

<sup>35</sup> Claud., *PandO* 71-72; cf. *Ruf. 1.pr.*12-14; *Get.* 598-600; *III Cons. pr.*15-16; *VI Cons. pr.*11-12. See also *Carm. min.* 3. Urania, the Muse of astronomy, is given a speech in *Theod.* calling on her sisters to attend Theodorus’s consular celebrations; *Theod.* 270-340. At *IV Cons.* 396 the spirit of Theodosius instructs Honorius to “cultivate the Muses.”

<sup>36</sup> Claud., *Ruf. 2.pr.*1-8.

<sup>37</sup> Juvencus, *Evangeliorum libri quattuor pr.* 25-27

mountain;” her invocation is rather *praesens deus*.<sup>38</sup> Prudentius commands the Muses to turn to the service of the Christian God: “Spurn, Muse, the trifling ivy with which you were previously wreathed, and, having been taught to weave mystical garlands, tie them with a band of dactyls, and garland your hair with the praise of God.”<sup>39</sup> He opens his epic, *Psychomachia*, with an invocation of Christ: “Christ, having compassion always on the burdensome sufferings of men... speak, our king.”<sup>40</sup>

In electing to continue with the invocation of the Muses, in maintaining them as the epitome of culture, Claudian is not simply following an empty tradition; rather he is deliberately positioning himself to resist the erasure of the Muses and their replacement with Christ by his contemporary poets. It is tempting to regard the idea of Musaic inspiration in poetry as, after over a thousand years of use, purely conventional, entirely unrelated to any real divine or religious understanding. And it is certainly true that the role of the Muses had been complicated, questioned, even treated with levity over the centuries in the pre-Christian era.<sup>41</sup> But we ought not underestimate the genuinely numinous quality of the Muses. Julian argued in his (in)famous rescript on Christian teachers that, “The gods led Homer and Hesiod and Demosthenes and Herodotus and Thucydides and Isocrates and Lysias in all their learning. Did not some think themselves dedicated to Hermes, others to the Muses?”<sup>42</sup> The connection between classical learning and divine revelation was commonly made in Late Antiquity, whether by

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<sup>38</sup> Proba, *Cento Virgilianus de laudibus Christi* 14, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Prud., *Liber Cathemerinon* 3.26-30.

<sup>40</sup> Prud., *Psych* 1, 5. “Christe, graves hominum semper miserate labores...” an allusion to Aeneas’s prayer to Apollo in *Aen.* 6.56, “Phoebe, gravis Troiae semper miserate labores” reinforcing the displacement of Apollo (the “Muse-leader”) by Christ. See Peltari, *The Psychomachia of Prudentius*, 15, 91; Hardie, *Classicism and Christianity*, 135.

<sup>41</sup> Efrossini Spentzou, “Introduction: Secularizing the Muses”, in *Cultivating the Muse: Struggles for Power and Inspiration in Classical Literature*, ed. Efrossini Spentzou and Don Fowler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1-28; Karin Schlapbach, “The Temporality of the Muses: A Reading of the Sister Goddesses in Late Antique Latin Literature,” in *The Muses and their Afterlife in Post-Classical Europe*, ed. Kathleen Christian, Clare Guest, and Claudia Wedepohl (London: The Warburg Institute, 2014), 33. See also Wheeler, “The Introit from Homer to Apollonius,” 44-47 on the rejection or questioning of the Muses in Hellenistic poetry.

<sup>42</sup> Jul., *Ep.* 36.423A; see with Ryser, *Education, Religion, and Literary Culture*, 46-47.

poets, Neoplatonist philosophical holy men, even orators.<sup>43</sup> This is something that Claudian seems keen to emphasize, for example, describing himself as a *vates*, a term with religious connotations, in his Muse-invocation in *PandO*.<sup>44</sup> The Muses appear often, not as indistinct, “secularized” symbols of the arts, but in conjunction with members of the pagan pantheon, such as in the preface to Book 2 of *In Rufinum*, where Mars is pacified by their melody, or in Urania’s speech in the panegyric for Theodorus, in which the Muses are dispatched on errands to various Olympian gods.<sup>45</sup>

The point is not that referring to the Muses in this way was an incorrigibly pagan thing to do, indicative of open hostility to Christianity. In a famous verse letter, also written in the 390s, the Christian poet Paulinus of Nola rebukes his former teacher Ausonius:

Why, father, do you admonish me to return to my care the Muses whom I have banished? Hearts consecrated to Christ reject Camena and do not lie open to Apollo. There was once concord between you and I, equals, if not in achievement then at least in enthusiasm, to bring forth insensible Phoebus from the Delphic cave, to call the Muses divinities, and singing to seek the favor of the god as a gift from groves and hills. Now however, another force set my mind in motion, a greater God...<sup>46</sup>

Paulinus, who after a conventional literary education turned to a more ascetic form of Christianity, rejects the Muses as the source of poetic inspiration, which he declares must, for any Christian, come from the

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<sup>43</sup> On poetry, see Robert Shorrock, *The Myth of Paganism: Nonnus, Dionysus and the World of Late Antiquity*, (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011), esp. 14-15 (see also 33 for his comments on the connection between poetic and oracular inspiration). For philosophy, see Garth Fowden, “The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982), 33-59. On orators, see Laurent Pernot, *Epideictic Rhetoric: Questioning the Stakes of Ancient Praise* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 85. Cf., for example, the Musaic invocation of Themistius, *Or.* 19.228b, an author who styled himself as both philosopher and orator.

<sup>44</sup> Claud., *PandO* 71. On the distinction between the divinely inspired *vates* (which can also denote an oracle or seer), and one depending on their own human *ingenium*, see Karla Pollmann, “Establishing Authority in Christian Poetry of Latin Late Antiquity,” *Hermes* 41.3 (2013), 311.

<sup>45</sup> Claud., *Ruf.* 2.pr.17-20; *Theod.* 282-332.

<sup>46</sup> Paul., *Carm.* 10.19-31.

God of the Bible.<sup>47</sup> Ausonius, though, was a fellow Christian, who simply had a different view of the significance of classical culture than his former pupil.<sup>48</sup> Ausonius even calls the Muses *numina*, for which he is rebuked by Paulinus.<sup>49</sup> Clearly he did not believe referring to the Muses in this way had any religious implications. He was one of those Christians for whom the link between the Muses and the divine had been “erased,” so that he could ever refer to them in such numinous terms without worrying about what this meant for his Christian faith.

Witke comments that, “If Paulinus really felt that... the Muses were divine, he is probably the first person so to think in centuries.”<sup>50</sup> On the contrary, though, as I have argued, the divinity of the Muses was a complex question in the classical world, and in Late Antiquity the question was clearly contested: some Christians (such as Paulinus), felt the Muses were irredeemably linked with pagan religion, while others, such as Ausonius, clearly did not. We ought not to try to determine which side was “right,” but rather observe the existence of the debate, and the context it supplies for the works of a pagan poet like Claudian. The Muses could clearly be accepted by Christians as aestheticized symbols of classical culture. But this need not mean that this was all they were or could be. Their use by a pagan poet, who, if anything, plays up their sacred aura, when contrasted with their rejection by his Latin contemporaries, encourages us to be open to ambivalent readings of their religious significance. When read in this way, Claudian’s use of the Muses stands against, on one hand, their replacement by the Christian God as a source of poetic inspiration, and against the erasure of religious significance by Ausonius.

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<sup>47</sup> For full accounts of this exchange, see Charles Witke, *Numen Litterarum: The Old and the New in Latin Poetry from Constantine to Gregory the Great* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 3-74 and now Hardie, *Classicism and Christianity*, 6-43.

<sup>48</sup> For Ausonius’s Christianity, see Roger Green, *The Works of Ausonius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), xxvii-xxviii; Cameron, *Last Pagans*, 176-177. *Contra* Kahlos, *Debate and Dialogue*, 41-42 who classifies him as an *incertus* (see above, n. X). Paulinus’s verse, despite its rejection of the Muses, is nonetheless classicizing, see Witke, *Numen Litterarum*, 59-64; Hardie, *Classicism and Christianity*, 18-21, 26-27, 31-38.

<sup>49</sup> Ausonius, *Ep.* 21.73-4; see Michael Stuart Williams, “*Sine numine nomina*: Ausonius and the Oulipo,” in *Unclassical Traditions, Volume I: Alternatives to the Classical Past in Late Antiquity*, ed. Christopher Kelly, Richard Flower, and Michael Stuart Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 2010), 90.

<sup>50</sup> Witke, *Numen Litterarum*, 45.



A wider argument could be made along these lines about Claudian's relationship with the classical literary tradition. The Alexandrian poet draws heavily upon his predecessors, and particularly on Virgil; a natural enough source when attempting to portray Roman glory and imperial destiny.<sup>51</sup> What appears entirely conventional when read in isolation begins to take on a more polemical edge when read against the contemporary Christian reuse of Virgil's poetry. When set against Prudentius's reuse of the epic form to tell an allegory of Christian virtue in *Psychomachia*, or Proba's spoliation of Virgilian verse to tell the story of Christ in her cento, the use of the great Augustan poet for more traditional purposes was not, in the late fourth century, a neutral act.<sup>52</sup> Where his Christian rivals turn the Virgilian motif of the Golden Age, those passages about the new state of paradisaic bliss, found in texts such as *Eclogue* 4 and *Aeneid* 6, into Messianic prophecies, Claudian finds in them a more traditional Roman significance.<sup>53</sup> In Claudian, it is the young consuls Probinus and Olybrius, or the emperor Honorius, to whom Virgil's language of a promised child and a new era of joy and fecundity is applied, not to Christ and His kingdom.<sup>54</sup> Claudian's Virgil is of the Roman, pagan past, the Virgil who shows a Roman Empire divinely ordained by Jupiter; not the Virgil who foretold Christ's coming, or

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<sup>51</sup> For Claudian's dependence of Virgil, see Ware, *Claudian and the Roman Epic Tradition*.

<sup>52</sup> This is not to say that the Christian poets' use of Virgil (or other classical authors) was exclusively or even primarily "negative" or critical. On Prudentius's complex relationship with Virgil, see Charles Witke, "Recycled Words: Vergil, Prudentius and Saint Hippolytus," in *Romane Memento: Vergil in the Fourth Century*, ed. Roger Rees (London: Duckworth, 2004), 135; Marc Mastrangelo, *The Roman Self in Late Antiquity: Prudentius and the Poetics of the Soul* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 14-15; Aaron Pelttari, *The Space That Remains: Reading Latin Poetry in Late Antiquity*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 131-160; Hardie, *Classicism and Christianity*, 208.

<sup>53</sup> For Christian readings of "Messianic" passages in Virgil, see Constantine, *Oratio ad sanctorum coetum* 19-20, also Aug., *Civ. Dei* 10.27. These appear poetically in Proba, *Cento Virgilianus de laudibus Christi* 377-379 (see with Karla Pollmann "Sex and Salvation in the Virgilian Cento of the Fourth Century," in *Romane Memento: Vergil in the Fourth Century*, ed. Roger Rees (London: Duckworth, 2004), 89; and in Prudentius' hymn on the Nativity Prud., *Liber Cathemerinon* 11.73-76 (see with O'Daly, *Days Linked by Song*, 331-350).

<sup>54</sup> On Claudian's allusions to these texts, see Stephen Wheeler, "More Roman than the Romans of Rome: Virgilian (Self-)Fashioning in Claudian's *Panegyric for the Consuls Olybrius and Probinus*," in *Text and Culture in Late Antiquity: Inheritance, Authority, and Change*, ed. J.H.D. Scourfield (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2007), 108-110; 115; Hardie, *Classicism and Christianity*, 51-52; Dewar, *Claudian*, 386. For a full account of Claudian's use of the "golden age," see Ware, *Claudian and the Roman Epic Tradition*, 171-230.

whose words could be reassembled to tell the Biblical narrative, as in the cento of Proba. In doing so, Claudian defines himself and his work against those Christian poets. Clearly, this did not make Claudian's work unacceptable to a Christian audience, and it still functions successfully as panegyric for a Christian emperor. No one in the imperial regime would have been concerned to hear Honorius' reign proclaimed a golden age, nor even a comparison with Virgil's child of destiny. Virgil's legacy still had a charisma that appealed across religious divisions. Nonetheless, Claudian seems clear in his own mind, and suggests to his pagan audience, that Virgil was not an unwitting prophet of Christ, but rather the high priest of *Romanitas*. He was intent on preserving the classical legacy against its reinterpretation and concomitant erasure by his Christian contemporaries.

#### IV. Fighting Erasure: Roman and *Romanitas*

*Romanitas* is one of the principal themes of the *Carmina maiora*. Though addressing, for many of the orations, Christian rulers in Milan, Claudian presents a traditional, "Roman" portrait of emperor and empire facilitated by an array of Virgilian themes and allusions.<sup>55</sup> In one sense, this is an entirely conventional panegyric theme, that would appeal to elites of all religions; pagans and Christians alike had a strong sense of the value of "Roman-ness." Stilicho's non-Roman origins perhaps also made this a particularly worthwhile aspect for Claudian to emphasize on his behalf.<sup>56</sup> But, by examining closely Claudian's use of this theme, and by once again setting it against the backdrop of Christian developments in imperial ideology, we can detect the struggle against the erasure of traditional religion that he is waging beneath the surface.

The goddess Roma, the personification of the city of Rome, appears frequently in the *Carmina maiora*, and is often given lengthy speeches.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Stephen Wheeler, "The Emperor's Love of Rome in Claudian's *Panegyric on the Sixth Consulate of Honorius*," in *Classics Renewed: Reception and Innovation in the Latin Poetry of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott McGill and Joseph Pucci (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016), 205-213.

<sup>56</sup> Álvaro Sánchez-Ostiz, "Claudian's Stilicho at the *Urbs*: Roman Legitimacy for the Half-Barbarian Regent," in *Imagining Emperors in the Later Roman Empire*, ed. Alan Ross and Diederick Burgersdijk (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 310-330.

<sup>57</sup> She appears in Claud., *PandO* 124-173, *Gild.* 17-130, *Ent.* 1.371-513, *Stil.* 2.269-339; *VI Cons.* 356-425 (notably including orations delivered in Milan as well as Rome itself).

Undoubtedly, she is a figure whom Claudian found dramatically useful. Cameron argues that this is the extent of her significance:

She appears so frequently in Claudian, not because he was obsessed with her or worshipped her, but rather because she was dramatically the most appropriate figure to exhort Stilicho to save the East from Eutropius or Africa from Gildo or (above all) to officiate in a consular panegyric... To think differently is... to be misled by the splendor and frequency of Roma's appearance in Claudian's poems into ignoring the insignificance of the actual role she plays therein. She is for Claudian the personification of the city of Rome, no more and no less.<sup>58</sup>

It would certainly be inappropriate to infer that Claudian felt any special spiritual affinity with Roma; this need not mean that she is without religious significance. That she fulfils an important literary and rhetorical role is of course true, but this does not in itself exclude a religious reading; the same might be said of, for example, Venus in the *Aeneid*. There is no reason to suppose, as it sometimes has been, that a personification goddess such as Roma was considered less "real," less truly divine, and therefore less offensive to Christian sensibilities than the gods of the traditional pantheon.<sup>59</sup> The status of such figures is difficult to pin down, principally because they were ambiguous and contested in Antiquity.<sup>60</sup> But the cult of Roma was long established, and a dual temple to Roma and Venus stood on the *Via Sacra* in her eponymous city. Claudian emphasizes Roma's divinity, even more emphatically than in the case of the Muses, calling her variously *numen*, *diva*, and *dea*.<sup>61</sup> In *Gild.* she appears in that most classical of scenes, the Council of the Gods (placing her in the same mythic realm as Jupiter and

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<sup>58</sup> Cameron, *Poetry and Propaganda*, 364-365.

<sup>59</sup> As asserted by Dewar, *Claudian*, xx.

<sup>60</sup> Helpful remarks in Feeney, *Literature and Religion*, 88. Cf. the debate between Augustine and his congregation over the "Genius of Carthage" in Aug., *Serm.* 62.10. On this passage see now Mattias Gassman, "A Feast in Carthage: Testing the Limits of 'Secularity' in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 110 (2020), esp, 210; though I disagree with his assertion that the Christians of Carthage were "wrong" to reject the divinity of this figure; rather, the question was inherently ambiguous.

<sup>61</sup> *numen* at *PandO* 124-126; *diva* at *PandO* 165; *dea* at *VI Cons.* 428.

the rest of the pantheon).<sup>62</sup> In *PandO* she takes on the guise of Minerva (*ritus imitata Minervae*) bearing a shield, made by Vulcan, depicting Romulus and Remus with Mars.<sup>63</sup> If Roma can be thought of as the representation, the soul even, not just of the city but of the Roman state itself, then Claudian's portrayal of her is absolutely traditional, set amongst and dependent on the gods of Roman paganism.

Roma appears frequently in the literature of the late fourth and early fifth century, and repeatedly in the texts that stem from the "Altar of Victory" controversy of the 380s and 390s, beginning with Q. Aurelius Symmachus's famous *Relatio* 3, in which the pagan senator writes a *prosopopoeia* for the goddess, defending Rome's traditional cult.<sup>64</sup> This device was taken up by Ambrose, bishop of Milan, in his response to Symmachus's appeal. He makes Roma reject paganism and proclaim her new allegiance to Christ.<sup>65</sup> Roma appears once again in Book 1 of Prudentius's *Contra Symmachum*, probably composed in the mid-390s, which explicitly harks back to the arguments of the 380s. Prudentius attacks Roma's cult:

The laurelled attendants standing by the god's temples, and the Sacred Way resounding with lowing before the temple of Roma (for she is worshipped with blood and the same customs as a goddess, the name of the place is held to be a divinity, and the temples both the city and Venus herself rise equally, together the twin goddesses are worshipped with incense).<sup>66</sup>

Elsewhere the notion of Roma's divinity is criticized:

And now, Roma, to touch briefly on your parents from the throne of heaven, on account of your descent from these ancestors, they boast that you are half-divine (*semideam*): Mars and Venus – he violated a priestess, she succumbed to a married Phrygian.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Claud., *Gild.* 26-133.

<sup>63</sup> Claud., *PandO* 84, 95-99. On the shield, see Wheeler, "Virgilian (Self-)fashioning," 110-113.

<sup>64</sup> Symm. *Rel.* 3.9.

<sup>65</sup> Amb., *Ep.* 73.7.

<sup>66</sup> Prud., *C. Symm.* 1.217-222 referring to the double temple built by Hadrian.

<sup>67</sup> Prud., *C. Symm.* 1.164-168.

The idea that Roma is the offspring of Venus and Mars appears to be a rather rare tradition, but, strikingly, it also appears in Claudian, who references this tradition in *Gild.*, which was first delivered in the spring of 398.<sup>68</sup>

Claudian does not allude directly to the “Altar of Victory” in his *Carmina maiora* – it would hardly be conducive to his purpose of uniting his audience in praise of the emperor.<sup>69</sup> Nonetheless, he was clearly aware of the resonances of doing so. His portrayal of a divinized Roma, a Roma without any hint of a conversion to Christianity is difficult to read as anything other than pointed, even polemical. Claudian and Prudentius even compose parallel accounts of Roma rejuvenated. In *Gild.* Claudian includes the following passage,

[Jupiter] spoke, and breathed on Roma with beautiful youth.  
Immediately vigor returned and the color of old age in her  
hair was changed. With her crest rising again, she lifted up  
her strengthened helmet, and her shield gleamed white once  
more, smooth and round, and rust having been shaken off,  
her horn shone.<sup>70</sup>

Compare this to the second book of *Contra Symmachum*, likely published in 402/403, an aged Roma is returned to youth and health by a conversion to the Christian God:

With everything renewed, I have put aside old age, and have  
seen my grey hair turn back to gold. For great antiquity  
diminishes everything mortal, long days flower again for me  
into another age, by living long, I have learned to despise  
ends. Now, now just reverence is granted to my years, now I  
have been consecrated with merit as venerable and head of  
the world. When I shake my helmet with the red crest  
beneath an olive branch and cover my fierce girdle with  
interwoven greenery and, having been armed, without

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<sup>68</sup> Claud., *Gild.* 127-129: “*Sic fata refusus/ obticuit lacrimis. mater Cytherea parensque/ flet Mavors...*”

<sup>69</sup> Note though his references to the state of Victoria that stood (now without its altar) in the Roman *curia* at *Stil.* 3.202-216 and *VI Cons.* 597-602.

<sup>70</sup> Claud., *Gild.* 208-212.

criminal slaughter, I worship God. For savage Jupiter convinced me to sin, alas, it makes me ashamed.<sup>71</sup>

Both poets portray the restoration of Roma, symbolic of the Roman state itself – the crucial difference is that Prudentius portrays it as the result of her allegiance to the Christian God, not, as in Claudian, to Jupiter – indeed the Christian poet includes a specific rejection of the pagan king of the Gods. The dates of Prudentius’s works are not certain, so we cannot be overconfident in constructing a precise chronology. But if the dates proposed in recent scholarship are correct then we have something approaching a dialogue. Prudentius criticizes the cult of Roma in book 1 of *Contra Symmachum*, to which Claudian responds in *Gild.*, picking up on Prudentius’s genealogy of the goddess and portraying her as renewed by the fiat of Jupiter.<sup>72</sup> A few years, later in 402/403, Prudentius ripostes with his own rejuvenation scene, this time at the hands of the Christian God, and in opposition to Jupiter. Nor did the matter rest there; Roma returns with a lengthy speech in Claudian’s *VI Cons.* of 404.<sup>73</sup> Once again, her connections to the pagan gods are mentioned as she invokes Jupiter, Triton, Minerva, and Apollo.<sup>74</sup> Her divinity is again emphasized as Claudian, in the mouth of the emperor no less, refers to her as *o dea*.<sup>75</sup> Reading the two authors in parallel, then, an ongoing contest over Claudian’s decade of activity for the soul of Rome’s tutelary deity emerges.

Roma then, in the context of Claudian’s orations, certainly functions effectively as a panegyric device, confirming that Honorius and Stilicho are worthy of Rome’s Empire. Christian members of the audience need not have been at all perturbed even by her highly traditional presentation (indeed, they may have welcomed it), not even by the affirmation of her divinity. But by reading Claudian’s references in the context of contemporary Christian literature, and in particular the direct parallels

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<sup>71</sup> Prud., *C. Symm.* 2.655-665.

<sup>72</sup> Recent scholarship has placed Book 2 of *C. Symm.* 402/403, with Book 1 composed earlier, in the wake of the battle of the Frigidus in 394; see the discussion in Cameron, *Last Pagans*, 337-349. If another dating of Prudentius’s works is to be preferred, then the chronology of these comparisons is of course different, but the essence of the debate remains.

<sup>73</sup> Claud., *VI Cons.* 356-425.

<sup>74</sup> Claud., *VI Cons.* 375, 378, and 412 respectively.

<sup>75</sup> Claud., *VI Cons.* 428.

with his poetic rival Prudentius, shows that an ambivalent reading is possible. As well as praising the Christian Emperor and his regent, Claudian is also contesting the erasure of pagan religion from imperial ideology. It reminds the audience, as Symmachus argues in *Rel.* 3, that it was under its traditional gods that Rome first thrived. Prudentius, like Ambrose before him, argues that only through conversion to Christianity can Rome be renewed; the “criminal slaughter” through which the old gods were worshipped must be erased. It is this erasure of the connection between Roma and traditional religion that Claudian contests. He pushes back against the Christian presentation of Rome’s tutelary goddess as reliant on the Christian God for renewal and restoration. Claudian thus enters, indirectly, the “Altar of Victory” debate that had run for (at least) the previous two decades. It is against Prudentius’s presentation of Roma in the *Contra Symmachum*, a text that explicitly intervenes on this issue, that Claudian frames his own Roman goddess.<sup>76</sup> He allows his rhetoric to be open to ambivalent readings – the reference to the controversy was not explicit and could no doubt be ignored by Christian members of the audience. But he also leaves open the possibility for a moment of religious contestation.

Perhaps the poem that most strongly displays Claudian’s vision of *Romanitas* is *VI Cons.*, delivered in Rome in 404 to mark Honorius’s sixth consulate and celebrate his advent into the ancient capital a few months earlier.<sup>77</sup> This poem has struck some readers as perhaps the most open in its allegiance to paganism; Charlet speculates that it may have been too much so for Stilicho, positing it as the reason that after this poem, we hear nothing further at all from Claudian.<sup>78</sup> I do not think this is likely, nor that *VI Cons.* represents a significant departure from the previous *Carmina maiora*, but certainly it is the work in which we see most clearly Claudian’s conception of an imperial ideology with *Romanitas* at its center. A large part of the poem consists of an *ekphrasis* of Honorius’s *adventus* into the city, which is styled by Claudian like a classical triumph. Travelling from Ravenna, the young emperor is said to have visited

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<sup>76</sup> For a full exploration of the role and significance of personified Victory in Claudian’s works, see Benjamin Kybett, *Religion and Rhetoric at the Courts of the Theodosians* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, Forthcoming).

<sup>77</sup> Wheeler, “The Emperor’s Love of Rome,” 195-200. On Honorius’s sojourn in Rome and the place of Claudian’s poem, see now Gavin Kelly, “Claudian’s Last Panegyric and Imperial Visits to Rome,” *Classical Quarterly* 66.1 (2016), 336-357.

<sup>78</sup> Charlet, “Claudien chantre païen,” 268-269.

Clitumnus, the source of white bulls, the traditional sacrifice that accompanied a triumph. He pours a libation to the Tiber and rides into Rome in full array. Later, he meets the senate under the protection of the statue of Victory in the senate.<sup>79</sup> No doubt much of this is anachronistic, and may represent only loosely the Honorius's actual arrival in Rome, but it enhances the portrayal of Honorius as the epitome of *Romanitas*.<sup>80</sup> It is a traditionalist image of what an emperor should be like. Honorius is said to arrive looking like Bacchus, and elsewhere his return is compared to the return of Apollo to Delphi.<sup>81</sup> The Palatine Hill is said to "exult in the dwelling of its god" – an imputation of imperial divinity that pays little regard to Christian sensibilities.<sup>82</sup> Despite this elevation to the supernatural, Honorius is praised for being accessible and courteous, forbidding the senators to walk before his chariot, and consulting with them on matters of policy, harking back (*veterum exempla secutus*) to the days when the emperor was merely *primus inter pares*.<sup>83</sup>

In reality, the role of the emperor was changing. The young Honorius could not lead Rome's armies in battle, but he could be the focal point of the rituals of power. Increasingly, as child rule became a frequent state of affairs, greater emphasis was placed on the emperor's (Christian) piety.<sup>84</sup> The most famous contemporary depiction of Honorius is the consular diptych of Probus, in which the emperor bears a banner with the legend *IN NOMINE XPI VINCAS SEMPER*. Christian literature of this period reflects the attempt to construct a new imperial ideology removed from Rome's pagan past. For Prudentius, Honorius is

<sup>79</sup> Claud., *VI Cons.* 506-508 (Clitumnus), 520-522 (Tiber), 587-602 (the Senate).

<sup>80</sup> Isabella Gualandri, "Honorius in Rome: A Pagan *Adventus*?" in *Culture and Literature in Latin Late Antiquity: Continuities and Discontinuities*, ed. Paola Francesca Moretti, Roberta Ricci and Chiara Torre (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 27.

<sup>81</sup> Claud., *VI Cons.* 563; 25-38.

<sup>82</sup> Claud., *VI Cons.* 35-36: "*ecce Palatino crevit reverentia monti / exultatque habitante deo.*" The question of imperial divinity in late antique panegyric is a complex and nuanced one which I cannot here do justice to, but the suggestion that the living emperor was a *deus* contradicts, say, the depiction by Ambrose in his funerary orations that the emperor was a sinful human being, a "mere Christian," see, for example, Amb., *de ob. Val. Jun.* 48.

<sup>83</sup> Claud. *VI Cons.* 549-550, 587-591; cf. Pacatus's account of Theodosius's sojourn in Rome, *Pan. Lat.* II(12).47.3.

<sup>84</sup> For these changes to the imperial role and the dynamics of child rule, see Meaghan McEvoy, *Child Emperor Rule in the Late Roman West, AD 367-455* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 204-213.



*Christopotens iuvenis*.<sup>85</sup> In Ambrose's funeral oration for Theodosius, Honorius is Joseph to his father's Jacob, his rule sanctioned by God.<sup>86</sup> One item on Honorius's itinerary during his time in Rome – one that is conspicuously absent from Claudian's account – shows the regime's desire to encourage this Christian ideology. We learn from Augustine that Honorius paid a visit to the tomb of St. Peter on the Vatican (where he would later build a mausoleum), kneeling and removing his crown – the emperor of Rome paying homage before the *princeps apostolorum*.<sup>87</sup> In ignoring this striking ceremonial novelty, and all it implies about the new Christian image of the Emperor, Claudian conducts his own erasure.

Finally, let us take perhaps Claudian's most lavish *ekphrasis*, his vision of Rome under Honorius's rule, which is placed near the beginning of *VI Cons.*:

No other, certainly, was fit to be the home to the rulers of the world, on no other hill does power so completely judge its worth, and discern the highest summits of justice. The royal palace, elevated to the apex over the rostra, sees so many temples of so many gods, circled around, keeping watch. It delights to see beneath the abode of the Thunderer, hung by the Giants from the Tarpeian rock, and the engraved gates, and the statues flying in the midst of the clouds, and the crowded sky crammed with temples, and the air planted with columns, topped with many ships' prows, and dwelling places resting on vast hilltops, nature increased by human hands, and innumerable arches gleaming with spoils. Sight is stupefied by the luster of metal, and made dull, trembling at the surrounding gold.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Prud., *C. Symm.* 2.710.

<sup>86</sup> Amb., *de Ob. Theod.* 54-55.

<sup>87</sup> Augustine, *Sermo cum pagani ingrederentur* 26. See with Johannes Wienand, "O tandem felix civili, Roma, Victoria! Civil-War Triumphs from Honorius to Constantine and Back," in *Contested Monarchy: Integrating the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century AD*, ed. Johannes Wienand (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 172-173.

<sup>88</sup> Claud., *VI Cons.* 39-52.

As Gualandri comments, this passage is “ambiguously poised between aesthetic celebration and religious nostalgia.”<sup>89</sup> Claudian’s Rome is full of temples, not of churches or martyr shrines: this is the city of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, not St. Peter and St. Paul. His description of them “circled around, keeping watch” parallels contemporary discourse about the protection offered by Christian holy sites.<sup>90</sup> It may again recall Symmachus’s *Relatio* 3, with its suggestion that Rome’s safety was dependent on the pagan gods.<sup>91</sup> Of course, a Christian audience could understand it as an entirely conventional encomium of *Roma Aeterna* under Theodosian rule, its glory undimmed to the present day, tarnished neither by contemporary political crises, nor, indeed, by the coming of Christianity. But equally, it could be heard by the pagan audience – as in the case of Claudian’s personifications of Roma, or of his depiction of Honorius’s *adventus* – as a subtle reminder that Rome’s greatness was connected to its traditional religion, and an attempt to resist the erasure of that connection by Christian polemicists.

## V. Conclusions: Contesting Erasure in Late Antiquity

What impact did Claudian’s attempts to resist the erasure of traditional Roman religion make? In attempting to answer this question, it is worth returning briefly to the context of the *Carmina maiora*. Claudian was, of course, not a poet scribbling away in isolation on an estate near Alexandria, nor even passing around verses for the amusement of the pagan aristocracy of Rome. His poetry was intensely political, authorized by the Stilichonian regime. Claudian was no dissident, certainly not in public, nor do I think that we should see the religious material I have explored here as a form of cryptic protest. Claudian was known as a pagan, and I do not think his attachment to traditional religion was “veiled.” The religious ambivalence of his poetry, the availability of multiple readings, does not mean that he was seeking to smuggle a defense of paganism past the Christian authorities.<sup>92</sup> There may be some

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<sup>89</sup> “ambiguamente in bilico fra la celebrazione estetica e la nostalgia religiosa,” Gualandri, “Il Classicismo Claudiano,” 46.

<sup>90</sup> Michael Roberts, “Rome Personified, Rome Epitomized: Representations of Rome in the Poetry of the Early Fifth Century,” *American Journal of Philology* 122.4 (2001), 554.

<sup>91</sup> Symm., *Rel.* 3.9-10.

<sup>92</sup> That is to say, it is not the same as the “doublespeak” sometimes identified in panegyric, praise that conceals an implicit critique. See Shadi Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience:*

persuasive value in the glowing portrayal of a Rome at one with traditional religion, and of the dependence of classical culture on the pagan gods, in keeping these images and ideas before the eyes of the imperial regime and Christian court.<sup>93</sup> But the principle purpose was to praise Honorius and Stilicho in a manner accessible to members of the court of all religious identities, to create a mirror reflecting a glorious image of the imperial court and its rulers. In this, if we are to judge the rewards Claudian received from Stilicho's regime, and the regularity with which he was called upon to speak, he was supremely successful.<sup>94</sup>

This implies that Claudian's attempts to contest and resist the erasure of paganism from classical culture and imperial ideology were, if not perhaps endorsed, then at the very least permitted. It suggests, in itself, that the poet's endeavors were not fruitless. Narratives of the late fourth century, and in particular the period after the Battle of the Frigidus in 394 have often been dominated by the notion of growing Christian intolerance, the retreat of paganism in the face of a Christian triumphalism propounded by figures like Prudentius and Ambrose, who wished, of course, to eliminate traditional religion, but were also determined, in the first instance, to see it driven from the political sphere. The fact that a pagan such as Claudian was allowed, as late as the first years of the fifth century, such a central role in the formation and dissemination of imperial ideology shows the limits of their success.

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*Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 155-157, 169-180. Often attributed, for example, to Julian's panegyrics for Constantius II, on whom he would later declare war, see Shaun Tougher, "Reading between the lines: Julian's *First Panegyric* on Constantius II," in *Emperor and Author: The Writings of Julian the Apostate*, ed. Nicholas Baker-Brian and Shaun Tougher (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2012), 27-30.

<sup>93</sup> On persuasive and exhortative aspects of epideictic rhetoric, see Ruth Webb, "Praise and Persuasion: Argumentation and Audience Response in Epideictic Oratory," in *Rhetoric in Byzantium: Papers from the Thirty-fifth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Exeter College, University of Oxford, March 2001*, ed. Elizabeth Jeffreys (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 127-135; Ruth Webb, *Ekleptics, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 160-164; Laurent Pernot, *Epideictic Rhetoric: Questioning the Stakes of Ancient Praise*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 87-94.

<sup>94</sup> Claudian was appointed to the position of *tribunus et notarius*, a (by this stage probably entirely ceremonial) office which conveyed senatorial rank. He was voted a statue in Rome, the inscription of which records this dignity, and proclaims him the equal of Homer and Virgil *CIL* 6.1710. Serena, wife of Stilicho and a Theodosian princess, seems to have taken a close interest in Claudian's career and arranged for him an advantageous marriage; Claud., *Carm. min.* 31.35-48.

Claudian could not turn back the tide of Christianization, but he could, for a few years at least, resist the erasure of paganism.

We might expect erasure and attempts at erasure, in Late Antiquity and beyond, to be the cause of contestation and conflict. But erasure is well-equipped to cover its own tracks, it removes not only that which is erased but also, often, the evidence of controversy. This is the case in the literal, physical erasures considered elsewhere in this volume, as well as in the conceptual erasure of traditional religion and its links with classical culture and the Roman state. In Claudian's *Carmina maiora*, then, we have a useful example of erasure contested.

## Abbreviations

### Works of Claudian

<i>PandO</i>	Panegyric on the Consuls Probinus and Olybrius ( <i>Panegyricus dictus Probino et Olybrii consulibus</i> )
<i>Ruf.</i>	Against Rufinus ( <i>In Rufinum</i> )
<i>Gild.</i>	The War Against Gildo ( <i>De bello Gildonico</i> )
<i>III Cons.</i>	Panegyric on the Third Consulship of Honorius ( <i>Panegyricus de tertio consulatu Honorii Augusti</i> )
<i>Theod.</i>	Panegyric on the Consulship of Flavius Manlius Theodorus ( <i>Panegyricus consulatu Flavii Manlii Theodori</i> )
<i>Stil.</i>	On the Consulship of Stilicho ( <i>De consulatu Stilichonis</i> )
<i>VI Cons.</i>	Panegyric on the Sixth Consulship of Honorius ( <i>Panegyricus de sexto consulatu Honorii Augusti</i> )
<i>Get.</i>	The Gothic War ( <i>De bello Getico</i> )
<i>Carm. min.</i>	Shorter Poems ( <i>Carmina minora</i> )

### Works of Prudentius

<i>C. Symm.</i>	Two Books Against the Speech of Symmachus ( <i>Contra orationem Symmachi libri duo</i> )
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