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Christian Asceticism and Barbarian Incursion: The Making of a Christian Catastrophe

Jerome integrated the barbarian attacks of 407 into a powerful narrative. His story of a “Thirty Years’ War” began with the crossing of the Danube in 376 and resulted in a single catastrophe: the fall of the western empire. In his writings, he gave meaning to the experience of war. His perception was determined by Christian eschatology, orthodoxy, and asceticism. Using traditional motifs and ascetic discourses, Jerome enforced Christian virtues and developed an interpretation that was able to establish social and religious consensus in a time of crisis and help to guarantee the social cohesion of Christian elite networks.

In 1979, the American historian George F. Kennan described the First World War as “the great seminal catastrophe of this century,” causing the death of thousands and thousands of people and resulting in the destruction of the old European order.¹ Contemporaries already had perceived the war as a global disaster with long-lasting consequences, and in Germany, after the military collapse and the democratic revolution in November 1918, the outbreak of the war was interpreted as the beginning of a new era. The “Great War” then was described as a deep hiatus between the idealized past of the *Kaiserreich* and the crisis-ridden presence of the Weimar Republic. Later generations of scholars traced the German *Sonderweg*, or the “German catastrophe,” to quote Friedrich Meinecke,² back to the year 1914 and described the First World War as an anacrusis of the second.

Recent studies, however, have dismissed this teleological interpretation of the First World War and integrated the conflict into the history of the late

¹ G.F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck’s European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875–1890* (Princeton, 1979); also W.J. Mommsen, *Die Urkatastrophe Deutschlands. Der Erste Weltkrieg 1914–1918* (Stuttgart, 2002).

² F. Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe. Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen* (Wiesbaden, 1946).

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³ Innovative research has analyzed the historical function of war in politics, society, and culture, and we have learned to identify narrative patterns of interpretation with which contemporaries tried to understand their experience of war. Jay Winter and Aribert Reimann, for instance, demonstrated that the supposed hard facts of war were themselves a product of culturally determined perceptions and that soldiers and civilians alike shared a common language that aimed at building a political and social consensus in times of war.⁴

Reflecting on such studies, this article seeks to reconstruct the perceptions of the barbarian incursion of 407 (or 406) in Christian circles of the early fifth century.⁵ It will focus upon the adaptation and transformation of traditional discourses and rhetorical motifs as a means of coping, from a Christian perspective, with the extreme situation of war on Roman soil and of explaining the political disintegration of the Roman Empire. It aims to show that it was of vital importance for Christian intellectuals to synthesize the experience of crisis into a persuasive interpretation of contemporary history in order to ensure the social cohesion of aristocratic Christian groups in the *Imperium Romanum* at a time of increasing barbarian pressure. For brevity's sake, the focus will be upon a single, exceptional, Christian author: Jerome.

Initium Mali

In 407, Jerome watched the drama of the collapsing western empire in distant Bethlehem. Alarming news reached him. He was told that barbarian hordes had crossed the Rhine, invaded Gaul, and spread terror. Like so many other Christians, he was tortured by the question of why God allowed this to happen after the glorious triumph of Christianity. He attempted to answer that question in letters and commentaries written at the beginning of the fifth century. Generations of scholars have discussed and used his evidence as a source for reconstructing the Rhine crossing and the invasion of Gaul.⁶

³ See the review articles by B. Davis, "Experience, Identity, and Memory: The Legacy of World War I," *Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003), 111–31; and A. Reimann, "Der Erste Weltkrieg—Urkatastrophe oder Katalysator?," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 29–30 (2004), 30–38.

⁴ J. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (London, 1986); J. Winter, B. Baggett, 1914–1918. *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century* (London, 1996); A. Reimann, *Der große Krieg der Sprachen. Untersuchungen zur historischen Semantik in Deutschland und England zur Zeit des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Essen, 2000).

⁵ For an attempted redating of the invasion, see M. Kulikowski, "Barbarians in Gaul, Usurpers in Britain," *Britannia* 31 (2000), 325–45, and Idem, *Rome's Gothic Wars* (Cambridge, 2007), 217. For the traditional date of 407, see A.R. Birley, *The Roman Government of Britain* (Oxford, 2005), 455–60.

⁶ See, e.g., H. Castritius, *Die Vandalen* (Stuttgart, 2007); P. Courcelle, *Histoire littéraire des grandes invasions germanique*, 3rd ed. (Paris, 1964); Chr. Courtois, *Les Vandales et l'Afrique* (Paris,

But Jerome did not write for them. He was not interested in any precise historical information; the picture he painted is “broadly impressionistic.”⁷ His list of attackers is a mess, or to put it more euphemistically, “a display of ethnographic virtuosity,”⁸ and his information about cities that had fallen is distinctly idiosyncratic.⁹

The devastation of Gaul was depicted as part of a global catastrophe. That message mattered, not any historical or any ethnographical detail. The story of ferocious barbarians and captured Roman cities began in 376, when the Goths crossed the Danube, and was followed by the death of the Roman emperor Valens, killed at the battle of Adrianople in 378. The “lacrimabile bellum in Thracia,” the “mournful war in Thrace,” marked the end of Jerome’s *Chronicle*,¹⁰ composed in the year 380. The horrible event was labeled as the starting point of a new period and heralded an insecure future and the decline of Rome.¹¹ Adrianople prevented Jerome from continuing his chronicle: “I am content to stop at this date, reserving the remainder of events from Gratian to Theodosius for a much larger historical treatment, not because I should have any fear to write openly and truthfully about those still living . . . but because, with the barbarians still rioting in our land, all things are uncertain.”¹² Jerome might have agreed with his former friend and later rival Rufinus when the latter described the Gothic raids in his ecclesiastical history as the “initium mali

1955); E. Demougeot, *De l'unité à la division de l'empire romain 395–410. Essai sur le gouvernement impérial* (Paris, 1951); E. Demougeot, *La formation de l'Europe et les invasions barbares*, vol. 2, *De l'avènement de Dioclétien (284) à l'occupation germanique de l'Empire romain d'occident* (Paris, 1979); J.F. Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul* (London, 1983); J. Fischer, *Die Völkerwanderung im Urteil der zeitgenössischen kirchlichen Schriftsteller Galliens unter Einbeziehung des heiligen Augustinus* (diss. Univ. of Würzburg, 1942; Heidelberg, 1948); W. Goffart, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire* (Philadelphia, 2006); P. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History* (London, 2005); L. Schmidt, *Geschichte der Wandalen*, 2nd ed. (Munich, 1942, reprint Munich, 1970); O. Seeck, *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt*, vol. 5, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, 1920); B. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, 2005); H. Wolfram, *Das Reich und die Germanen. Zwischen Antike und Mittelalter* (Berlin, 1990).

⁷ J.H.D. Scourfield, *Consoling Heliodorus: A Commentary on Jerome, Letter 60* (Oxford, 1993), 210.

⁸ Hier. *Epist.* 123.15.2; and Kulikowski, “Barbarians,” 326 n.5.

⁹ Hier. *Epist.* 123.15.3; *pace* Kulikowski, “Barbarians,” 331ff.

¹⁰ Hier. *Chron.* s.a. 378 (Helm, ed., p.249).

¹¹ See J. Straub, “Die Wirkung der Niederlage bei Adrianopel auf die Diskussion über das Germanenproblem in der spätrömischen Literatur,” *Philologus* 95 (n.f. 49) (1943), 255–86 = Idem, ed., *Regeneratio Imperii. Aufsätze über Roms Kaisertum und Reich im Spiegel der heidnischen und christlichen Publizistik*, vol. 1 (Darmstadt, 1972), 195–219; N. Lenski, “Initium mali Romano imperio: Contemporary Reactions to the Battle of Adrianople,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 127 (1997), 129–68.

¹² Hier. *Chron.* praef. (Helm, ed., p.7): “Quo fine contentus reliquum temporis Gratiani et Theodosii latioris historiae stilo reservavi, non quo de viventibus timuerim libere et vere scribere . . . sed quoniam dibacchantibus adhuc in terra nostra barbaris incerta sunt omnia.”

Romano imperio tunc et deinceps,” that is, “the beginning of all evil for the Roman Empire then and thereafter.”¹³

This initial catastrophe was the point of reference Jerome used during the next decades whenever he integrated barbarian invasions and military conflicts into a larger historical fabric.¹⁴ In 396, Jerome wrote a consolatory letter to his old friend Heliodorus on the death of Nepotianus. There he lamented, “For twenty years and more, Roman blood has been spilled every day between Constantinople and the Julian Alps. Scythia, Thrace, Macedonia, Thessaly, Dardania, Dacia, the provinces of Epirus, Dalmatia, and all the Pannonias have been laid waste, pillaged, and plundered by Goth, Sarmatian, Quadian, Alan, Huns, Vandals, and Marcomanni.”¹⁵ At that time, the northern and western frontiers of the empire were being continually breached. Barbarian invaders first spread themselves out over the Danubian provinces, then Alaric ravaged all of Greece. Some ten years later, the Rhine was crossed by different peoples, and finally Italy came in for its share of terrors. Now Jerome spoke of the Thirty Years’ War that devastated the empire: “For a long time, from the Black Sea to the Julian Alps, our land is no longer our own. During the last thirty years, the frontier of the Danube has been destroyed and war has come to the inward parts of the Roman empire.”¹⁶ The final blow was the sack of Rome in 410: “Terrifying news comes to us from the west, of Rome besieged and its citizens forced to ransom their lives with gold . . . The city that took captive the whole world is itself held captive.”¹⁷

The barbarian attacks of the years between 376 and 410 were thus integrated in a powerful narrative. Jerome did not relate various catastrophes through which the Roman world had been shaken here and there, but instead

¹³ Ruf. *Hist.eccl.* 2.13 (Mommsen, ed., p.1020).

¹⁴ See E. Coleiro, “The Decay of the Empire and Fall of Rome in Saint Jerome’s Letters and Lives of the Hermits,” *Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Malta* 1 (1957), 48–57; J. Doignon, “Oracles, prophéties, ‘on-dits’ sur la chute de Rome (395–410). Les réactions de Jérôme et d’Augustin,” *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 36 (1990), 120–46; M.J. Kelly, *Life and Times as Revealed in the Writings of St. Jerome Exclusive of His Letters* (Washington, 1944), 98–101; Lenski, “*Initium*”; J.-R. Palanque, “St. Jerome and the Barbarians,” in F.X. Murphy, ed., *A Monument to St. Jerome: Essays on Some Aspects of His Life, Works, and Influence* (New York, 1952), 173–79; F. Paschoud, *Roma aeterna. Études sur le patriotisme romain dans l’Occident latin à l’époque des grandes invasions* (Rome, 1967), 209–21; M.R. Salzman, “Jerome and the ‘Fall’ of Rome,” forthcoming, *Athenaeum*; K. Sugano, *Das Rombild des Hieronymus* (Frankfurt, 1983); Straub, “Wirkung.”

¹⁵ Hier. *Epist.* 60.16.2, text cited below.

¹⁶ Hier. *Epist.* 123.16.1: “Olim a mari Pontico usque ad Alpes Iulias non erant nostra, quae nostra sunt, et per annos triginta fracto Danubii limite in mediis Romani imperii regionibus pugnabatur.”

¹⁷ Hier. *Epist.* 127.12.1: “Terribilis de occidente rumor adfertur obsideri Romam et auro salutem civium redimi . . . capitur urbs, quae totum cepit orbem.”

told a unified story of a Thirty Years' War that began with the crossing of the Danube and resulted in a single massive catastrophe: the decline and fall of the western empire. We must next consider the terms in which Jerome described this sudden, dramatic reversal and how he explained it.

Haeret Vox

Romanus orbis ruit, the Roman world was collapsing.¹⁸ The chronographer's voice stuck in his throat, "haeret vox," and sobs disturbed his every utterance, "singultus intercipiunt verba dictantis."¹⁹ And yet the bulwarks of classical rhetoric stood firm. A few examples will suffice. Jerome's description of the barbarian invasion of 407 is full of rhetorical elements. Just compare the asyndetic lists of peoples in *Epistle* 60.16.2 (composed in 396):

Viginti et eo amplius anni sunt, quod inter Constantinopolim et Alpes Iulias cotidie Romanus sanguis effunditur. Scythiam, Thraciam, Macedoniam, Thessaliam, Dardaniam, Daciam, Epiros, Dalmatiam cunctasque Pannonias Gothus, Sarmata, Quadus, Alanus, Huni, Vandali, Marcomanni vastant, trahunt, rapiunt.²⁰

and in *Epistle* 123.15.2 (written in 409):

innumerabiles et ferocissimae nationes universas Gallias occuparunt. quicquid inter Alpes et Pyrenaeum est, quod Oceano Rhenoque concluditur, Quadus, Vandalus, Sarmata, Halani, Gypedes, Heruli, Saxones, Burgundiones, Alamanni et—o lugenda res publica!—hostes Pannonii vastaverunt.²¹

The enumeration of enemies closely follows the rules of ancient ethnography, and Scourfield has rightly observed that Jerome, in both sentences, switches from singular to plural in the middle, "no doubt for the sake of stylistic *variatio*."²²

Traditional motifs conceptualized the experience of war. Jerome cited the champions of Latin poetry and the Old Testament, quoted Vergil and Horace, Isaiah and the Psalms, and used a language with which every educated Christian was familiar. In 409, he recalled the poet Lucan who had

¹⁸ Hier. *Epist.* 60.16.3.

¹⁹ Hier. *Epist.* 127.12.1.

²⁰ Translated above.

²¹ "Savage peoples in countless numbers have overrun all parts of Gaul. The whole country between the Alps and the Pyrenees, between the Rhine and the Ocean, has been laid waste by Quadian, Vandal, Sarmatian, by Alans, Gepids, Heruls, Saxons, Burgundians, Alamanni and—pity the empire!—even Pannonians-turned-enemies."

²² Scourfield, *Consoling Heliodorus*, 211.

asked in his epic *De bello civili*, “What is sufficient, if Rome is not?”²³ Jerome varied these words and posed the following question: “What shall remain, if Rome perishes?”²⁴ The fall of the city was compared to the punishment of Moab,²⁵ the destruction of Jerusalem,²⁶ and the fall of Troy, with a quotation from Vergil:

quis cladem illius noctis, quis funera fando
 explicet aut possit lacrimis aequare dolorem?
 urbs antiqua ruit multos dominata per annos
 plurima per que vias sparguntur inertia passim
 corpora perque domos et plurima mortis imago.

Who can set forth the carnage of that night?
 What tears are equal to its agony?
 An ancient city is falling, after long years of power;
 So many motionless bodies prostrated everywhere
 Along the streets, in the houses; and you saw every shape of death.²⁷

Historical examples were used to present the events in historical perspective. The invasion of 407 also is the object of Jerome’s *Epistle* 123, addressed to the Gallic aristocrat Geruchia some two years later. Here, Jerome reminded his reader that Italy and Rome had been plundered by Brennus and his Gauls many centuries before, and that Pyrrhus and Hannibal had ravaged the country without taking the *urbs*.²⁸ It is worth noting that exactly the same *exempla* were used by Claudian in his writings on the wars against the barbarians.²⁹ The “wandering poet” praised Stilicho as the new Camillus and the new Scipio³⁰ at the same time that Jerome attacked him as a half-barbarian traitor.³¹ But in both cases, famous historical examples and a rhetorically embellished style aimed to depict the military catastrophe in ways that made it possible to comprehend the otherwise incomprehensible. Pagan and Christian authors used a common language of crisis.

Jerome, moreover, emphasized that the historical situation of the Roman Republic had been profoundly different because the lands of the former

²³ Hier. *Epist.* 123.16.4: “Quid satis est, si Roma parum est?”; cf. Luc. 5.274.

²⁴ Hier. *Epist.* 123.16.4: “Quid salvum est, si Roma perit?”

²⁵ Hier. *Epist.* 127.12.2; cf. Is. 15:1.

²⁶ Hier. *Epist.* 127.12.2; cf. Ps. 78:1–3.

²⁷ Hier. *Epist.* 127.12.2; cf. Verg. *Aen.* 2.361–65; 369.

²⁸ Hier. *Epist.* 123.16.

²⁹ Claud. *De bello Getico* 430–32; *In laud. Stil.* 3.21–2; see Palanque, “St. Jerome,” 190–91.

³⁰ Claud. *In laud. Stil.* praef. 21–2.

³¹ Hier. *Epist.* 123.16.2.

conquerors thereafter became tributary to the Roman people, whereas now, he went on to say, “There is nothing we could get from our present enemies other than what they have already stolen from us.”³² Yet, there still was hope for the future, enunciated by Jerome with another classical quotation: “Should the world break and fall upon him / the ruins would smite him undismayed.”³³

At the acme of the barbarian assaults, Jerome fell back upon his classical education and biblical reading. Traditional discourses and rhetorical motifs were adapted and transformed not only in order to articulate the omnipresent experience of war at the beginning of the fifth century but also to integrate the dissolution of the western empire and the fall of Rome into a coherent vision of history. So what patterns of interpretation did Jerome have to offer?

Verum quid ago?

In his short *Commentary on Daniel*, written in 407, and his eighteen books *On Isaiah*, composed between 408 and 410, Jerome insisted that the fall of Rome could be a portent of the consummation of the world.³⁴ It seemed for a moment that the Roman Empire might be marked for destruction. In the collection of apocalyptic visions presented in the book of Daniel, Jerome saw a prophecy of the unhappy time in which he was living. Explaining a dream of Nebuchadnezzar, he recognized in the iron and clay statue shown to the Babylonian king a symbol of the transformation of the Roman Empire. The iron was meant to represent the ancient glory and former power of Rome, whereas the clay indicated the decline of the present time: “There was nothing more mighty or invincible than Rome at her outset; today there is nothing weaker; in our civil wars and in our wars with foreign nations, we are reduced to depending upon the aid of other barbarian peoples.”³⁵

Eschatology became more and more important. Jerome reflected upon the ultimate destiny both of the individual soul and of the whole created order. In a letter written in 408, he asked: “‘Verum quid ago?’ (‘But what am I doing?’) While I am talking about the cargo, the vessel itself sinks. The empire that ruled the world is abolished, and yet we do not understand that Antichrist is

³² Hier. *Epist.* 123.16.4: “Nunc, ut omnia prospero fine eveniant, praeter nostra, quae amissimus, non habemus, quod victis hostibus auferamus.”

³³ Hier. *Epist.* 130.7.3: “Si fractus illabatur orbis / impavidum ferient ruinae”; cf. Hor. *Odes* 3.3.7–8.

³⁴ See Hier. *Comm. in Dan.* 1.2.31–35; 2.7.8 (Glorie, ed., pp.794–5, 844); *Comm. in Is.* XI praef. (Adriaen, ed., p. 428).

³⁵ Hier. *Comm. in Dan.* 2.40 (Glorie, ed., p.634): “Sicut enim in principio nihil Romano imperio fortius et durius fuit, ita et in fine rerum nihil imbecillius, quando et in bellis civilibus et adversum diversas nationes aliarum gentium barbararum indigemus auxilio.”

near.”³⁶ In a pessimistic mood, he began his *Commentary on Ezekiel* in 410: “When the most brilliant light of the world was extinguished, when the head of the Roman Empire was severed . . . in one city the whole world perished.”³⁷

Jerome, like so many of his pagan and Christian contemporaries,³⁸ believed for a while that the disaster represented the beginning of the end of the Roman Empire and perhaps even of the world. Further instances of misfortune, such as famines, epidemics, and earthquakes, only seemed to corroborate this interpretation. But waiting for the world’s collapse did not excuse one from explaining the cause of the catastrophe. This was a significant issue because polytheists and Christians offered competing accounts of the present misery, each party accusing the other of responsibility for the paralysis of the empire. But either way, the controversial discourse on liability reached the same conclusion: neglect of the deity was what had caused the disaster of the barbarian incursion. Christians and polytheists recognized in the catastrophe the *ira dei*, divine anger for the failure of religious observance.³⁹

All authors also emphasized that the external problems were aggravated by internal ones. Jerome, for instance, blamed intrigue and treachery at the imperial court, corruption and mutiny in the Roman army, and the wickedness of barbarian or semi-barbarian officials in the Roman civil and military administration.⁴⁰ Confidence in the competence and authority of the Roman government was rapidly diminishing. Once again, however, Jerome was not content simply to list factors. He meant to present a persuasive interpretation of the disaster, directed equally against pagan polemics attacking imperial disregard of the traditional pantheon and heterodox readings of the signs of the times by heretical Christians.

In his *Chronicle*, Jerome interpreted Adrianople as the defeat of an Arian emperor and Valens’ death as divine punishment for his religious persecutions.⁴¹ But in 407 the situation was different. Nicene orthodoxy was triumphant, no heterodox emperor could be held responsible, and the Arian confession of the barbarian invaders did not seem to matter much. Now Jerome blamed moral degeneration and human vice in general, moaned about the loss of morale, and attacked human pride. Already in 396 he had lamented, “The Roman world is

³⁶ Hier. *Epist.* 123.15.1: “Verum quid ago? fracta nave de mercibus disputo. qui tenebat, de medio fit, et non intellegimus adpropinquare Antichristum.”

³⁷ Hier. *Comm. in Ezech.* prol. (Adriaen, ed., p.4): “Postquam vero clarissimum terrarum omnium lumen exstinctum est, immo Romani imperii truncatum caput . . . in una urbe totus orbis interiit.”

³⁸ For the views of Augustine, for example, see J.-C. Fredouille, *Sermons sur la chute de Rome* (Paris, 2004).

³⁹ See, Straub, “Wirkung,” 196ff.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Jerome’s polemics against Stilicho in Hier. *Epist.* 123.16.2.

⁴¹ Hier. *Chron.* s.aa. 375, 378 (Helm, ed., p.248–9); see Lenski, “*Initium*,” 163.

collapsing, and still our proud necks are unbowed.”⁴² In 413, he repeated the charge, “The whole world is falling, and still our sins are not decreasing.”⁴³ In company with other Christian authors, he exploited the barbarian incursions as evidence for his own view of what constituted proper Christian conduct and his own interpretation of divine providence. God’s chastisement fell upon unworthy and insubordinate citizens, “We have long felt that God is angry, but we do not try to placate him. It is because of our sins that the barbarians are strong, through our vices that the Roman army is defeated.”⁴⁴

If the Roman Empire was falling apart and the future of the world uncertain, one ought to strive for a life of perfection. In 409, Jerome appealed to an aristocratic Gallic woman not to marry again when everyone expected the approach of the Antichrist and the end of the world.⁴⁵ “But woe to those who are with child, or have infants at the breast in those days,” he wrote, quoting Matthew (Mt. 24:19). Then he turned to present calamities.⁴⁶ At about the same time, he wrote to Rusticus, a Christian in Gaul, who had made a vow of continence with his wife. She joined Jerome in Bethlehem, but Rusticus, who had promised to follow her, stayed at home, a victim of the incursions, and failed to fulfill his promise.⁴⁷ Jerome exhorted him to keep his vow. Among the arguments he adduced was a meditation on “the death of your friends and fellow citizens, the destruction of towns and country estates . . . You wander about in your country, but indeed no longer your country, for you have lost your homeland.”⁴⁸

The rhetorically polished story of the barbarian incursions was designed to encourage men and women to reject the pleasures of the world and renounce secular possessions. “If we want to be raised up, let us cast ourselves down!,” Jerome exclaimed.⁴⁹ Hence, “using the troubles of his time as a pretext for counseling virgins against marriage and widows against a second espousal,” he encouraged virginity and chastity.⁵⁰ He asked Geruchia, “Dearest daughter in Christ, answer

⁴² Hier. *Epist.* 60.16.3: “Romanus orbis ruit, et tamen cervix nostra erecta non flectitur.”

⁴³ Hier. *Epist.* 128.5.1: “Pro nefas, orbis terrarum ruit et in nobis peccata non corruunt”; see Palanque, *St. Jerome*, 195–6.

⁴⁴ Hier. *Epist.* 60.17.1: “Olim offensum sentimus nec placamus deum. nostris peccatis barbari fortes sunt, nostris vitiis Romanus superatur exercitus.”

⁴⁵ Hier. *Epist.* 123; see S. Rebenich, *Hieronymus und sein Kreis. Prosopographische und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Stuttgart, 1992), 285–89.

⁴⁶ Hier. *Epist.* 123.15.1: “Vae praegnantibus et nutrientibus in illis diebus.”

⁴⁷ Hier. *Epist.* 122; see Rebenich, *Hieronymus*, 284ff.

⁴⁸ Hier. *Epist.* 122.4.3–4: “Quodsi te rei familiaris tenent reliquiae, ut scilicet mortes amicorum et civium videas et ruinas urbium atque villarum, saltim inter captivitatis mala et feroces hostium vultus et provinciae tuae infinita naufragia teneto tabulam paenitentiae et memento conservae tuae, quae tuam cottidie suspirat nec desperat salutem. tu vagaris in patria, immo non patria, quia patriam perdidisti.”

⁴⁹ Hier. *Epist.* 60.17.3: “Si erigi volumus, prosternamur!”

⁵⁰ Palanque, “St. Jerome,” 195.

me this question: will you marry amid such scenes as these? Tell me, what kind of husband will you take? One that will flee (that is, in disgrace before the enemy) or one that will fight (that is, in the battle against the invaders)?”⁵¹

In his letters and commentaries directed to and at Roman aristocrats, Jerome developed a model for the future that survived the decline and fall of the empire because it not only was apologetic but also responded to the religious doubts of wavering Christians, while challenging the strongly expressed views of polytheist intellectuals. The inhabitants of the western half of the empire, who had lost their confidence in the divine palladium, now could believe in a new idea of salvation that gave meaning to their personal misfortune: God had sent the barbarian hordes from the realms of glory because he wanted Christian men and women to concentrate on eternal life. The Christian interpretation of the barbarian incursion advocated ascetic virtues such as *humilitas*, *castitas*, and *paupertas* and spread the message of an ascetic way of life that attracted many members of the senatorial aristocracy. At this point, and to conclude, we should turn our attention to the social consequences of the making of a Christian catastrophe.

Facta est paupertate et humilitate nobilior

The social and cultural impact of 407 was as important as its material consequences. The experience of the catastrophe significantly contributed to the enforcement of a new code of aristocratic behavior. The senatorial aristocracy defined and constituted itself not only through rank, influence, and proximity to the emperor, but also through cultural and social practices. Ancestry and education, landholding and housing, social prestige and aristocratic *memoria* all were of major significance. Senatorial conduct rested upon collectively accepted cultural norms that concealed the social heterogeneity of the stratum and helped to integrate social climbers. Christian authors such as Jerome endorsed the traditional order of society and recognized the aristocratic claim for cultural excellence and social eminence. Jerome sought to reconcile Christian virtues with the traditional primacy of the senatorial aristocracy: “Learn in this respect a holy arrogance; know that you are better than they.”⁵² Ascetic virtues now guaranteed the superiority of Roman aristocrats and counted more than any ancestral nobility. Whereas pagan relatives strongly opposed conversions to asceticism, Jerome Christianized aristocratic competitiveness and emphasized that holy women, and men, surpassed the old nobility of

⁵¹ Hier. *Epist.* 123.17.1: “Responde mihi, carissima in Christo filia, inter ista nuptura es? quem acceptura virum? credo fugiturum aut pugnaturum.”

⁵² Hier. *Epist.* 22.16.1: “Disce in hac parte superbiam sanctam, scito te illis esse meliorem.”

birth and office: “nobilis genere, sed multo nobilior sanctitate,” that is, “noble in family, but much nobler in holiness.”⁵³

The better part of mankind, “pars melior humani generis,” to use Symmachus’ definition of the senatorial aristocracy,⁵⁴ still identified itself by impressive genealogies, immense fortunes, overwhelming prestige, and social munificence, but Jerome now added ascetic values, which outlasted the loss of secular possessions during the barbarian invasion. The story of the Thirty Years’ War enforced ascetic *virtutes* and supported the building of religious and social homogeneity in aristocratic circles in the west.

“You set before me the joys of wedding; I for my part will remind you of the pyre, the sword, and the flames,”⁵⁵ words directed by Jerome to Geruchia following the barbarian invasion in 407, not only are reminiscent of Vergil’s dramatic account of Dido’s fate, but also reflect the deplorable condition of Gaul in his time. Jerome gave meaning to the experience of war. His perception was determined by Christian eschatology, orthodoxy, and asceticism. Using traditional motifs and ascetic discourses, he developed an interpretation that helped to establish social and religious consensus in a time of crisis and guarantee the social cohesion of Christian elite networks. Jerome ushered in a new epoch. He offered western Roman aristocrats an ascetic lifestyle that ensured their claim for excellence in a period of imperial decline. Thus, in his obituary of Marcella, written after the fall of Rome, he remarked, “Nihil in illa laudabo, nisi quod proprium est et in eo nobilium, quod opibus et nobilitate contempta facta est paupertate et humilitate nobilior” (“I will praise her for nothing but the virtue which is her own and which is the more noble, because forsaking both wealth and rank was made even more noble by poverty and humility”).⁵⁶

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⁵³ Hier. *Epist.* 108.1.1; also Hier. *Epist.* 129.1.1; 130.6.1; Aug. *Epist.* 150; Paul.Nol. *Epist.* 29.6; also Rebenich, *Hieronymus*, 181–192; Idem, “*Pars melior humani generis*—Aristokratie(n) in der Spätantike,” in H. Beck, P. Scholz, U. Walter, eds., *Die Macht der Wenigen. Aristokratische Herrschaftspraxis, Kommunikation und ‘edler’ Lebensstil in Antike und Früher Neuzeit* (Munich, 2008), 153–75; Michele R. Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); H. Sivan, “On Hymens and Holiness in Late Antiquity: Opposition to Aristocratic Female Asceticism at Rome,” *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 36 (1993), 81–93; B. Feichtinger, “Zäsuren, Brüche, Kontinuitäten. Zur aristokratischen Metamorphose des christlichen Askeseideals am Beispiel des Hieronymus,” *Wiener Studien* 110 (1997), 187–200.

⁵⁴ Symm. *Epist.* 1.52.

⁵⁵ Hier. *Epist.* 123.13.2: “Proponis mihi gaudia nuptiarum; ego tibi opponam pyram, gladium, incendium.”

⁵⁶ Hier. *Epist.* 127.1.3.