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THE RESTORATION POLICY OF VETTIUS AGORIUS PRAETEXTATUS

MAIJASTINA KAHLOS

The Roman senator, Vettius Agorius Praetextatus (310/320-384), is known to have striven for the promotion of pagan cults in the fourth century. He collected several priesthoods and initiations of pagan cults. As a Roman magistrate he restored and protected pagan temples.¹ In this paper I will place his restoration activities in a broader context. I will try to clarify the meaning of the role the restoration and the protection of pagan temples had in the ideological combat in Rome at the end of the fourth century. I will also discuss the significance of cult places in the pagan topography of Rome.

Protecting public buildings

Pagan temples were closed and their revenues confiscated by the imperial government, but at the same time, imperial legislation obliged the authorities to protect the temples as public monuments and as fiscal property. Thus, temples were seen not only as civic ornaments and monuments of the past, but also as imperial property.² Still, aesthetic conservationists seem to have been few. Augustine disapproved of private use of pagan objects belonging to pagan monuments. Christians ought not to take any-

¹ PLRE I, Praetextatus 1, 722-724. CIL VI 1779 lists Praetextatus' priesthoods and initiations.

² Cod. Theod. 16,10,18 temples as imperial property; Cod. Theod. 16,10,19 temples in public use. Respect was shown for the monuments of the past: Cod. Theod. 15,1,19; 16,10,3; 16,10,8 aesthetic value; Cod. Theod. 16,10,15 protecting ornaments of temples. Even Prud. c. Symm. 1,502-505: *liceat statuas consistere puras, artificum magnorum opera...* R. Krautheimer, Rome, Profile of a City, 312-1308, Princeton 1980, 36-37; A. Wardman, Religion and Statecraft among the Romans, London 1982, 199, n.10.

thing for private use, to make it clear that they were destroying from piety, not from greed.³

The imperial government was neither efficient nor interested in protecting pagan monuments in Rome. It did not prevent Christian magistrates from destructing pagan shrines, e.g. in the case of Furius Maecius Gracchus who during his urban prefecture in 376-377 demolished a shrine of Mithras.⁴ In particular, temples suffered from private spoliation: decorations of temples were taken away and parts of temples were used for private constructions.

When Praetextatus held the city prefecture in 367 he took measures to protect public buildings, and particularly, temples. He had all the so-called *maeniana* removed. *Maeniana* referred to extra structures like balconies, colonnades or second storeys added privately to public buildings. According to Ammianus this kind of building had been forbidden in earlier times in Rome. Praetextatus also tore down the walls of private houses which had been illegally joined to temples.⁵

Aristocratic patronage and restoration of temples

In 382, the imperial government interrupted the public finance system for pagan cults. Wealthy pagan aristocrats had to take all responsibility for the upkeep of their religious centers without the benefit of state subsidies. At the end of the fourth century Christian building activity did not yet hold a monopoly in Rome. Many pagan monuments and public buildings were restored, remodeled, rebuilt, or redecorated. Pagan adherents continued to dedicate altars and cult statues and carried out the necessary restoration work on the buildings. The Forum Romanum in particular seems to have remained a pagan reserve. For example, the temple of Vesta (in 394) and the

³ Aug. epist. 47,3; Wardman 143-144.

⁴ Hier. epist. 107,2; Prud. c.Symm. 1,561-565. J. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A.D. 364-425*, Oxford 1990², 23 suggests that the destroyed Mithraeum could have been on some private property of the family of Gracchus; D. Vera, *Commento storico alle Relationes di Quinto Aurelio Simmaco*, Pisa 1981, 153-154, disagrees with Matthews.

⁵ Amm. 27,9,10: *Namque et maeniana sustulit omnia fabricari Romae priscis quoque vetita legibus et discrevit ab aedibus sacris privatorum parietes isdem inverecunde conexos*; Ebert, s.v. Maenianum, RE XIV, Stuttgart 1930, 245-247.

temple of Saturn (around 400) were restored. Most of the building activity of the time was restorative work.⁶

Both pagan and Christian aristocrats sponsored construction and restoration of shrines in Rome. This private patronage of religious building meant intense reaffirmation of the aristocratic code of life for pagan and Christian senators alike.⁷

The restoration of the *Porticus deorum consentium*

As a city prefect, Praetextatus restored and dedicated anew the *Porticus deorum consentium* in the Forum Romanum. The CIL VI 102 records this restoration by stating that Praetextatus restored the sacred statues (*sacrosancta simulacra*) of the *di consentes* and their cult in its old form. The restoration was probably restricted to the relocation of the statues of the Twelve Gods and to some restorations of the damaged parts of the monument.⁸

The portico of the *di consentes* stands below the cliff of the Capitoline Hill in the Forum Romanum. It had been originally built perhaps in the second or third century B.C., but its present form dates from the Flavian period. The statues of the *di consentes* probably stood in the intercolumniations of the colonnade of the portico. In the first century B.C. Varro records the existence of gilded statues of the Twelve Gods in the Forum Romanum.⁹

⁶ The only one major temple known to have been built in Rome after Constantine's death is the temple of Jupiter Heliopolitanus probably during the reign of Julian (361-363). D. Vera, *Koinonia* 7 (1983) 151, n.52; 152; Krautheimer 35; J.F. Merriman, *Aristocratic and Imperial Patronage of the Decorative Arts in Rome and Constantinople, A.D. 337-395*, Diss. Univ. of Illinois 1975, 23-24, 320-326.

⁷ Merriman 5, 40-41.

⁸ CIL VI 102 = ILS 4003: [*Deorum c]onsentium sacrosancta simulacra cum omni lo[ci totius adornatio]ne cultu in [formam antiquam restituto] / [V]ettius Praetextatus, v(ir) c(larissimus), pra[efectus u]rbi [reposuit] / curante Longeio [--- v(ir) c(larissimus), c]onsul[ari]. C.R. Long, *The Twelve Gods of Greece and Rome*, Leiden 1987, 243.*

⁹ A good report of the archeological phases of the *Porticus deorum consentium*: G. Nieddu, *Il portico degli dei consenti*, *Bollettino d'Arte* 71, 1986, 37-52. The first findings of the portico were made in 1833. CIL VI 102 was found in 1834. S.B. Platner - Th. Ashby, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome*, Oxford 1929, 421-422; F. Coarelli, *Roma, Guida archeologica Laterza, Roma-Bari* 1980, 1989⁶, 61; Krautheimer 35; Long 34, 243; Merriman 327, nr.2. Varro, *rust.* 1,1,4.

The *di consentes* had a special fundamental role in Roman state life. Perhaps the senatorial class wanted to project its own functions and its own dignity on a metaphysical level. The idea of the Twelve Gods as a heavenly projection of the senatorial class is clear in Martianus Capella: *Ac mox Iovis scriba praecipitur pro suo ordine ac ratis modis caelicolas advocare, praecipueque senatores deorum*.¹⁰ The *consensus*, the unanimity of the governing class, could also be emphasized. The Twelve Gods could also have represented an ideological and political conception antithetical to the emperor.¹¹

In addition to a political interest, there may also have been a clearly theological one: a neoplatonic interpretation of the divinities. H. Bloch has proposed that the portico of the Twelve Olympians - the *di consentes* - appealed to Praetextatus, because he saw in the traditional Twelve Gods the manifestation of one universal divinity. Bloch believes that Praetextatus did not restore the portico only to maintain the old cult but to propagate his ideology of the *numen multiplex*.¹²

The Twelve Gods appear in Neoplatonic literature of the fourth and fifth centuries; Iamblichus regarded them as hypercosmic deities. In Sallustius' treatise concerning the gods and the universe, the Twelve Gods governed the twelve spheres of the cosmos and were tutelae of the planets.¹³ The Twelve Gods are depicted as tutelae of the months and the zodiac also in Macrobius' *Saturnalia*. In the imaginary speech of Praetextatus, Mars and Venus are referred to as the tutelae of March and April.¹⁴ A connection between Praetextatus and the cult of the Twelve Gods can be seen also in the words of Macrobius: ... *magnum in caelo ducem solem vult sub appellatione Iovis intellegi ... atque ideo velut exercitum eius ceteros deos haberi per undecim signorum partes distributos, quia ipse duodecimi signi ... occupat*.¹⁵

The Roman *di consentes* were protectors of the city of Rome. Their cult, with its emphasis on civic responsibility and well-being, had been

¹⁰ Mart. Cap. 1,42.

¹¹ Nieddu 50-51.

¹² *Numen multiplex* in Praetextatus' funerary poem, CIL VI 1779; H. Bloch, HTR 38 (1945), 208; followed by Nieddu 50 and J. Flamant, *Macrobie et le néoplatonisme latin à la fin du IV^e siècle*, Leiden 1977, 32.

¹³ Long 317.

¹⁴ Macr. Sat. 1,12,5-8; zodiac signs, Macr. Sat. 1,12,10; Long 304, 326-327.

¹⁵ Macr. Sat. 1,23,5-6. Cfr. Mart. Cap. 1,45.

important for the Romans. Celebrations of the lectisternium in honour of the *di consentes* had been organized in order to protect the city. In the eyes of the Roman pagan aristocracy the restoration of the portico must have seemed essential to the welfare of the city. C.R. Long believes that restoring the *Porticus deorum consentium* was neither mere antiquarianism nor nostalgia. It was instead a practical measure designed to keep the tutelary deities of Rome favourable under threat of barbarian invasions.¹⁶ Augustine tells that some pagans blamed the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410 on the Christians for their neglect of the traditional gods.¹⁷

Porticus deorum consentium seems to be the last pagan monument erected or restored officially by a Roman magistrate. The dedicatory inscription significantly makes no mention of the emperor.¹⁸ The *praefectus urbi* bore the primary responsibility for the public works.¹⁹ Praetextatus was not the only individual known to have restored pagan shrines. Other restorations connected with the pagan state cult were carried out as a result of the financial assistance by the city prefect or other high magistrates of Rome, the temple of Apollo by Memmius Vitrasius Orfitus (PVR 357-359),²⁰ and the *Porticus Boni Eventus* by Claudius Hermogenianus Caesarius (PVR 374-375).²¹ The *praefectus annonae* Sempronius Faustus (under the pagan city prefect Tarracius Bassus) restored the temple of Isis in Portus.²²

Acts against the spoliation of temples

The overthrow of pagan temples was gradual, but the plundering and the destruction of temples by private persons continued undisturbed. In 384 it was possible for Praetextatus as pretorian prefect to try to put a stop to the spoliation of temples. He obtained from Valentinian an imperial order empowering the city prefect to investigate and to bring plunderers of public

¹⁶ Long 306-307, 243; Krautheimer 35.

¹⁷ Aug. civ. 2.3.

¹⁸ Long 305. Private restorations are known to have continued.

¹⁹ Merriman 35-36.

²⁰ CIL VI 45; Merriman 326-327, no.1.

²¹ Amm. 29.6.19; Merriman 37; Merriman 328, no.2, no.4, 329, no.1, no.2, 330, no.3, no. 4.

²² Amm. 28,1,27.

buildings, i.e. of temples, to justice. The current city prefect was Praetextatus' friend and ally Q. Aurelius Symmachus. Praetextatus' and Symmachus' actions were obviously intended to prevent Christian spoliation of pagan shrines and to restore ornaments removed from public places for private use.²³

Rumours reached the court of Milan that Symmachus was using the inquiry to maltreat Christians, and that he had imprisoned and tortured Christian priests. In a public letter, Emperor Valentinian reprimanded Symmachus and ordered that all whom he had imprisoned should be released.²⁴ Symmachus defended himself by stating that he had been authorized by Praetextatus who obtained the decree from the emperor himself. Besides, Symmachus had not even started the inquiry. Damasus, bishop of Rome, testified that no harm had been done to Christians.²⁵

D. Vera believes that the attack against Symmachus was actually targeted against Praetextatus. Praetextatus' restoration policy as a *praefectus urbanus* and as a *praefectus praetorio* may have annoyed those within the Christian circles at the court of Milan.²⁶

Praetextatus' ascent to the Capitol

Pagan restorations in Rome, Ostia, and Portus were not only a result of religious obligation or propaganda, but also a result of special pagan concepts of urban topography. These concepts were in contrast to Christian ideas of topography. Pagan ceremonial and cultural activities were located inside the walls of Rome, those of Christians outside the walls.²⁷

In 403, Jerome wrote how the city of Rome was shaken to its foundations. Christians rushed outside the walls to visit the martyrs' graves. The Capitol and all the temples of Rome were neglected, deserted, and half-

²³ Symm. rel. 21,3. The text of the imperial *decretum* is unknown. Symm. rel. 3,1 *subiecta legibus vitia* possibly refers to the decree. R.H. Barrow, *Prefect and Emperor*, Oxford 1973, 113; D. Vera, *SDHI* 44 (1978) 81-82; Vera, *Commento* 25, 158-159.

²⁴ Symm. rel. 21,1-3; 21,6.

²⁵ Symm. rel. 21,3-5. More about Symmachus' difficulties and about his enemies, see D. Vera, *Commento* xxxiv-xxxix, 153-160.

²⁶ Vera, *Commento* xlii, 160.

²⁷ Vera, *Koinonia* 149-151.

ruined.²⁸

The Capitol had been the centre of the pagan state cult. Jerome's account of Praetextatus' ascent to the Capitol illustrates the significance of the Capitol in the ideological contest between pagans and Christians. In a letter to Marcella, Jerome blames the recently dead Praetextatus who had ascended to the Capitol just a few days before his death as if he had been celebrating a triumph.²⁹

Praetextatus' ascent to the Capitol was a public and official procession because it was evidently organized by authorities of the city. According to Jerome, Praetextatus was preceded by the highest magistrates of the city (*dignitatum omnium culmina praecedebant*). This is a clear allusion to Symmachus, the city prefect at that time.³⁰

Jerome realized that though Praetextatus' ascent to the Capitol was not a real triumph, it was still connected to the tradition of triumph. Praetextatus and Symmachus organized a *spectaculum triumphale* inspired by a pagan triumphal ceremony.³¹ The Christian emperors had abandoned the traditional triumph that had culminated in a solemn sacrifice to Capitoline Jupiter. In 312, Constantine probably refused to present the customary triumphal offering on the Capitol.³² After Constantine no Christian emperor wanted to end his triumph in Rome with the traditional process to the Capitol and with the sacrifice to Capitoline Jupiter. This must have offended

²⁸ Hier. epist. 107.1 ad Laetam: *Auratum squallet Capitolium, fuligine et araneorum telis omnia Romae templa cooperta sunt, movetur urbs sedibus suis et inundans populus ante delubra semiruta currit ad martyrum tumulos.*

²⁹ Hier. epist. 23.2-3 ad Marcellam de exitu Leae (in 384): *Ille, quem ante paucos dies dignitatum omnium culmina praecedebant, qui quasi de subiectis hostibus triumpharet Capitolinas ascendit arces, quem plausu quodam et tripudio populus Romanus excepit.*

³⁰ Vera, *Koinonia* 143.

³¹ Vera, *Koinonia* 141, n.19, 142; L. Cracco Ruggini, *RAL* ser.8, 23 (1979) 17. Ruggini and Vera believe that Praetextatus' ascent to the Capitol (Hier. epist. 23.2-3) and the gladiatorial games described by Symmachus (rel. 47) were the two phases of the same ceremony, a pagan triumph.

³² The triumphator deposited his laurel wreath into the lap of the statue of Jupiter, *in gremio Capitolini Iovis*. Late descriptions of triumphs, Symm. rel. 9,3; Paneg. 9,5; Paneg. 6,8,7. The whole triumph was a special homage to Jupiter Optimus Maximus. In triumph a triumphator was temporarily approximated to Jupiter himself. Jupiter remained important for pagans: Aug. civ. 5.26; *Carmen contra paganos* 2; 122. H.S. Versnel, *Triumphus*, Leiden 1970, 1-2, 68-71, 95; S. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* 1981, 34-39; S. MacCormack, *Historia* 21 (1972) 728, 731; Vera, *Koinonia*, 141, n.19; 155.

traditionalist circles in Rome. Vera construes Praetextatus' ascent to Capitol as an act against Christian emperors.³³

When Praetextatus celebrated his 'triumph', pagan senators occupied the highest offices under the reign of Valentinian II, Praetextatus acted as pretorian prefect, and Symmachus functioned as city prefect. There had been discussion about whether the imperial government should continue supporting the old Roman state cult. Praetextatus' ascent could have been seen as a protest against the imperial antipagan legislation. Praetextatus had evidently had a leading role in ideological discussions as well as in the 'triumph'.³⁴ This explains why Jerome rebuked Praetextatus with such ferocity.

The ascent to the Capitol was essential also from a topographical point of view. The temple of Juppiter Optimus Maximus was an ideal centre for cherishing pagan religious traditions. Praetextatus and Symmachus wanted to demonstrate that the Capitol with its temples was still alive as a cult centre instead of merely a relic of the past.

Conclusion

It was important to hold high offices in order to control the financing of building and restoration projects. Praetextatus restored and protected public buildings and pagan temples in his function as a city prefect. As a pretorian prefect he attempted to prevent the spoliation of temples. Praetextatus used his high position to put his ideas into practice, but he was not the only magistrate to do so. Furius Maecius Gracchus destroyed a shrine of Mithras when he held the city prefecture (p.2). Both pagan and Christian magistrates exploited their positions in the contest between pagans and Christians.

There are two aspects interwoven in Praetextatus' restoration activities. He tried to keep the pagan religious tradition visible in the cityscape of Rome by restoring and protecting pagan shrines. There was also a tendency to emphasize the political senatorial tradition.

Both the restoration of the *Porticus deorum consentium* and the ascent

³³ Vera, *Koinonia* 143.

³⁴ Vera, *Koinonia* 142, 144, 150.

to the Capitol reflect the vital importance of a place to pagans. Paganism or polytheism could not have survived without cult sites in the struggle for its existence. A certain cult place was not as crucial for Christianity as for paganism. This is why the location of temples and shrines was important for pagans in Rome at the end of the fourth century.

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